

**Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee (ABRSC)
FY19 Budget Saturday Meeting
Approved Minutes**

**Library
R.J. Grey Junior High School**

**Saturday, January 27, 2018
8:30 a.m.**

Members Present: Diane Baum, Brigid Bieber, Mary Brolin, Dennis Bruce, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, Kathleen Neville, Deanne O'Sullivan, Eileen Zhang
Members Absent: none
Others: Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Karen Coll, Bill McAlduff, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino, members of the Towns' Boards, the public and staff

1. Welcome and Introductions from the Chairperson and Superintendent

The ABRSC was called to order at 8:30 a.m. by Chairperson Amy Krishnamurthy. Members of the Acton and Boxborough Finance Committees, and the Acton Board of Selectmen were introduced.

2. Panel 1: FY19 Budget Overview

- Bill McAlduff, Superintendent, did an introduction and overview.
- Dave Verdolino, Finance Director, reviewed the financials including revenues and expenses.
- Marie Altieri, Deputy Superintendent, presented the staffing, enrollment and elementary class sections reports.

Questions:

Was the vacancy factor overestimated in the past? Marie Altieri responded that the District began using the vacancy factor in FY13 and it took time to find the correct amount. This year is slightly over budget, but is being closely watched.

There seems to be a lack of understanding by some members of the public of how the District got to this critical place with respect to our capital/building problems and the relationship between the projections and actual changes in enrollment. Why was capital investment delayed in the past? Marie Altieri replied that the building expansions of the Parker Damon Building twin school, and the Junior High and High School increased our capacity by almost 1000 students over a 5-10 year period. Three major building projects were done in five years. Teachers and classrooms had to be added which meant much capital was directed to those costs, and not to other projects and needs. There was also a pretty significant downturn in the economy. The district now has an extensive capital plan in place for the future.

Is it a concern that the E&D figures don't show the \$710,000 to be spent on the feasibility study? Dave Verdolino explained that E&D was getting close to its cap over time, and has continued to grow. If the District can continue to turn back some amount of surplus each year, it will replace the funds spent on the feasibility study. In general, he stated that using E&D for one-time uses is prudent (vs using it to fund operating budget items). Bill McAlduff added that the District will still have a healthy balance in E&D and it is much improved compared to 4-5 years ago. They are comfortable with this recommendation.

Regarding slide 58 - Enrollment Projections – Is the District taking the large projected enrollment into account in the new building plans? Marie Altieri responded that the new building will add capacity

adequately for the next 5-8 years, and in 4-5 years we will hopefully be able to address Conant School and further expansion. Current preliminary plans for a new twin school have it as large as the Administration would like it to be. How will these enrollment projections affect space at the Junior High and High School? Marie stated that there should be space for the additional students for the next 12-13 years. Mary Brolin noted that with 9 school buildings, the District should be on a continuous cycle of capital improvement. Marie added that if enrollment numbers continue to change, we may have to address capacity at the Junior High/High School sooner than expected.

A question was asked about a line item in Special Education contracted services. Dave Verdolino explained that this was partially tuitions and partially administrative supplies that should not be in that category. It represents a shift of costs but not an increase and will be adjusted in the next reiteration.

Regarding OPEB on slide 33, is the District on target to fully fund OPEB by 2033? Dave Verdolino clarified that Middlesex, not OPEB, would be funded. Regarding OPEB, at some point that obligation will be fully funded although Dave described it as a political decision not an actuarial one. The District and the Town of Acton are addressing OPEB funding fairly aggressively relative to other districts, although it will be a fairly long time before funding levels can be reduced. It took 50 years to fully fund pension obligations, OPEB will take a generation.

Why is the money for the feasibility study not shown in the budget? Dave explained that it is not accrued yet. As a matter of accounting, it will be reflected in the 2018 E&D.

What is the impact of enrollment on the assessment for Acton and Boxborough? Referring to slide 49 showing current and projected assessment for the two towns, Dave explained how this information leads to what is found on slide 53. He noted that everything in future years is a projection, and it will take time to see how the numbers turn out.

How will the new Health Savings Account (HSA) rates be 18% lower than HMO rates? Marie Altieri explained that the district will pay \$1500 toward deductible, and this will still result in reduced cost to district. Because this does not start until July 1st, the actual impact is unknown.

Was it a surprise that the Middlesex County Retirement Assessment recommended increase for FY19 was only 8.4% (slide 36)? Dave explained that it was not. Assessments are done for 2 years in a row. It will be reassessed again in 2018 for FY20 and FY21.

How could health insurance rates be held to zero increases for FY18 and FY19? Dave responded that the Health Insurance Trust (HIT) has been accumulating funds for several years and this provides the relief.

Diane Baum appreciated the District's continued work funding OPEB and was pleased to see housing sales on slide 59. She noted that enrollment projections are difficult and critical to the budget and this data point is very helpful to keep the projections on track. Paul Murphy appreciated the descriptions of the capital projects in the binder, because they help to prioritize what is/isn't important. He expects to see more spending on the schools that are not being rebuilt in future years.

Regarding slide 53, how are the Acton and Boxborough assessments calculated? Marie Altieri explained the 3-year rolling average based on where students live that is used. It does not matter if Acton children go to the Blanchard School, or Boxborough students go to Acton elementary schools. Part of the Regional Agreement shifts some of the costs between the two towns during the first five years of full regionalization. It is a complicated process, as outlined in Table 6, and Marie and Dave would be happy to explain in more detail if anyone would like to contact her.

Break

3. Student Services Enrollment and Trends (began at 10:20)

- Dawn Bentley, Assistant Superintendent for Student Services

4. Panel 2: Our Current District Priorities

- Deborah Bookis, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning
- Dawn Bentley, Assistant Superintendent for Student Services
- Pam Smith, Director of Special Education
- Andrew Shen, Principal, R. J. Grey Jr. High
- Damian Sugrue, Principal, Conant School
- MaryAnn Young, English Learning Education Chairperson

Questions:

Regarding professional development, we still are very low in support compared to other districts (17 out of 20) but our innovation is remarkable. Why does it seem like the District is doing more than the numbers reflect? Deborah Bookis replied that it is difficult to compare districts due to the inconsistent way information is reported to DESE. It is not “apples to apples”. Hopefully there will be more accurate comparable information.

Are we trying to catch up with our demographic trends (ELL, economics, etc) or are we being innovative and staying ahead of the curve? Deborah replied that staff are working hard to identify how to shift approaches to build on students’ and teachers’ strengths and identify and remove barriers for students. AB uses a “strength/asset building approach that is innovative. They ask what a child can do, not what they cannot do.

Regarding the number of students we have on 504 Plans, are we a comparative outlier? Dawn Bentley replied that it is unclear because this is a new data field in SIMS reporting so she does not know yet.

Is there a correlation between the number of ELL students and the number of economically disadvantaged? Dawn said that in general, yes, but she will be looking more closely at this. She stated that ELL students are over represented in the special education numbers.

Deborah Bookis was thanked for her dedicated work in support of teachers. Regarding coaching, is their main job to support teaching standards, or is it also to support self-regulated strategies? Deborah said that it is not just about standards, but truly about supporting teachers in multiple ways – academic achievement, behavior, etc, Coaches also have subject matter expertise that is shared with teachers. A member commented that it is valuable to see the changing needs of our student populations. Does the administration also look at short term measurements, shorter than an academic year so there is more immediate feedback? Deborah said yes, the coaching cycle is 16 weeks. Mary Brolin noted that with a 200% increase in high needs students vs only a 100% increase in staffing, these levels of students need to be supported. Do the proposed increases for next year bring the District up to the required hours? Dawn Bentley said that a program review will be done to determine this. Are we looking into curricular ways to address language-based learning disabilities, eg adjusted curriculum to address dyslexia, etc. Pam Smith replied yes, teachers are being trained in ways to better address students with language learning barriers to access the curriculum. They are always looking at how services are being provided. A member agreed with the coaching approach, but expressed concern that more teaching might come from the coach, not teacher. There has to be a balance. Regarding slide 132 what does students’ “prior learning” mean? This refers to students who transfer in and bring very different levels of exposure to particular subjects and practices.

Regarding teaching and learning staff, how do we measure success? Deborah Bookis said that there are several measures. Assessing Math Concepts is one tool to see how students progress. MCAS 6th grade math scores have gotten higher, and can be compared with those same students’ earlier MCAS

scores to see those students' progress. Asking teachers for feedback on how coaches help can show instructional practice success.

What is the dollar impact of students who are economically disadvantaged or English Language Learners? Several administrators commented that it would be difficult to measure the overall impact of these groups of students throughout the system. Many of these students need additional supports but the costs are not broken out in that manner. The state has stopped measuring this number because it is so difficult to identify. Bill McAlduff responded that there is no dollar impact of the 10 students who have come into the system on the WIDA spectrum since the beginning of the year, but it has had an instructional impact on the teachers and other students for example. It is an impact on staff caseloads, and affects the compliance requirement hours. Many high performing districts are seeing increased numbers of ELL students and this requires staffing to meet the mandated requirements. It is a moving target year to year and during the year.

What has driven the number of FTEs for ELE? Is it not directly tied to growth in the number of students? Dawn Bentley commented that the district started behind their needs, and is catching up but arguably is still understaffed in some areas per the DESE recommended hours. There are 200 FELs (Former English Learners) who are also monitored, and the length of monitoring has been increased now from 2 years to 4. When more high needs students are added to a class, it impacts the ability to meet the needs of all of the children and keeps the ELL students in their classes for a longer time as a result. Brigid Bieber noted that regarding our performance measures, AB does very well even if we haven't been spending what we should. Some students with high needs, may not be getting all of their needs met and as a result, they are not doing as well. She asked if other metrics should be used to measure performance success because we may not be including all of our students right now.

A member of the public appreciated that the presentation includes information about the impact to students, but he felt that is often missing from other discussions about new programs and initiatives. He is concerned about equity data. Deborah Bookis explained that the Boston College research project is a great opportunity for AB that came from one of the Family Learning Series speakers. This work will be eventually published and available to everyone.

A High School student asked about the impact of changing the DESE standards, for example, the second year of world history has been meshed with other topics. Deborah Bookis said that sometimes the impact is new content, especially at the elementary level, biggest change is skills, not content that students are asked to learn. They don't want to change too many things too fast because teachers put a lot of effort into developing curricula.

What specific key performance indicators does the panel expect to use to measure success? Dawn Bentley answered that the Strategic Plan includes measures and one key issue is AB's core value of equity. They often ask if practices are aligned with this. The administration is moving away from items like MCAS, and looking at responsive classroom, etc. The speaker suggested that the District could look at things like reducing the average number of years in WIDA from level 1 to level 6, etc, as a way to measure, or students' movement from more restrictive to less restrictive settings.

Eileen Zhang appreciated the changing demographic information about the community and urged strong support of the ELL services and programs. She noted the increasing number of students who want to study in the US, including those from China, and encouraged the Committee and Administration to be prepared for them.

Lunch Break

5. Panel 3: School Operations

- Bill McAlduff, Superintendent
- Dave Verdolino, Finance Director
- JD Head, Director of School Operations

Questions:

JD Head confirmed that the Leary Field light poles were assessed in 2016 and per the recommendations, they are being replaced. The complete system is replaced with steel, not wood.

Bill McAlduff stated that the District needs to agree on a definition of what “capital” means. Because there is not a clear definition, some items on the Capital Spending list appear to be educational needs to some people. Bill said there will be some tweaks to the lists to put them in appropriate line items.

It was suggested that for the request line items, a column (s) be added to show future funding requests that are anticipated for particular requests.

The battery storage area will be in the High School third tier parking lot. JD stated that this would not present any safety issues. This will be a 2 megawatt battery that would cover the District’s peak needs with plenty to spare. More information will be presented to the Committee in February. Some questions were also asked about the solar power arrangement that provides the district with discounted power.

A member asked if this might be a good time to quantify the cost of our elementary school choice program, with single tier busing starting in the fall. This could help make informed decisions in the future.

Better signage for the High School and Junior High School Buildings was requested.

How do the proposed projects relate to Dore & Whittier’s Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)? Marie Altieri explained that of the \$120 million improvements outlined by D&W, \$40 million of them would be addressed by the new school building and another \$14 million termed “priority” have been addressed or are being addressed in this budget/plan. Bill McAlduff added that once the new building plan’s long term plan is clearly understood, the District will need to review and update the CIP. JD Head emphasized that a number of the items have been or will be addressed more cost effectively than the Plan suggests. There are also many variables as time goes by, so the Plan will always need to be reviewed and updated. While a “scorecard” would be valuable, it could be difficult to do precisely, given the changes that are inevitable.

It was confirmed that asbestos removal at Conant would be in the office only if found beneath the flooring. Bill McAlduff explained that this is a placeholder for work that may be needed. He stressed that it is sealed and safe and abatement would not be needed. Questions were also asked about the High School auditorium ceiling, which JD stated was safe. JD also explained that the funding for the Maintenance Shed was to analyze the site and make a recommendation. He wants to redirect these funds to higher priorities because the shed is a temporary site and JD knows it will be replaced.

6. Superintendent’s Closing Remarks

The Superintendent thanked everyone involved in the development of the proposed FY19 Budget totaling \$88,960,000 representing a 3.3% increase over FY18.

7. School Committee Discussion, Feedback, Preliminary VOTE

Described as a “responsible and responsive” budget, the Committee was impressed with the overall proposal.

Brigid Bieber moved:

That the total appropriation for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District for the fiscal year of July 1, 2018 through June 30, 2019 be set at \$88,960,000, and that member towns be assessed in accordance with the Education Reform Law and the terms of the Regional Agreement and amendments thereto as follows: Acton \$60,184,325, Boxborough \$11,389,584, with the remainder to be accounted for by the following sources of funds:

**Anticipated Chapter 70 Aid in the amount of \$14,995,436,
Anticipated Charter School Aid in the amount of \$33,282,
Anticipated Regional Bonus Aid in the amount of \$25,000,
Anticipated Federal Medicaid Reimbursement of \$150,000,
Anticipated Chapter 71, Section 16C Transportation Aid of \$1,307,373,
Anticipated Investment Earnings of \$100,000, and
A transfer from E&D Reserves in the amount of \$775,000.**

Paul Murphy seconded the motion.

Given that at the last Committee meeting, members voted to offer up to \$220,000 to the new superintendent, Dennis Bruce asked if the \$195,000 contained in the proposed budget should be increased. Bill McAlduff said that leading up to the Budget Hearing on February 15th, adjustments to the budget would be made as numbers are confirmed and revised, so he was comfortable not changing the salary number at this time for the preliminary budget vote.

The Committee **VOTED** unanimously by the 4 Boxborough members and 6-1 by Acton members to approve the motion.

(IN FAVOR: Bieber, Brolin, McKinley, Neville, Baum, Krishnamurthy, Minkin, Murphy, O’Sullivan, Zhang OPPOSED: Bruce) It was stated that for the preliminary budget vote, a majority of the members from each town must vote in support for approval.

Dennis Bruce explained that he voted against the budget because he felt that with almost a half million dollars less in health insurance expenses, salaries are going up and the increase is a large assessment for Acton taxpayers.

Amy Krishnamurthy thanked everyone for attending the meeting and he ABRSC adjourned at 2:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: Agenda, FY19 Budget Binder, Presentation Slides