

Finance Oversight Committee Meeting Minutes

April 20, 2023

Present: Dawn Starks, Chair, Kathleen Hill (via Zoom), Jim White, Jay Seyler, Council President Ralph Page (ex-officio), Deputy Town Manager Tom Christensen, ELPS Superintendent Gordon Smith, ELPS Assistant Superintendent Pamela Blair.

Attending: Marilyn Richards, Christine Saulnier, Greg Thompson

Location: Meeting was held in the COA Media Room

Meeting Called to Order: 1:30 pm by Dawn Starks

Starks asks committee members to introduce themselves.

White volunteers to take meeting minutes.

White motions to approve minutes from previous meeting. Seyler seconds. Voting YES to approve the meeting minutes for the April 20, 2023 are Hill, Seyler, Starks and White.

ELPS Superintendent Gordon Smith distributes printed budget overview and presents verbal budget request “roadmap” that includes key budgetary requirements and how budget was developed.

Highlights include:

- Mass Operational Services Division approving 14% increase in tuition for special education school programs
- Investment in paraprofessional group whose compensation was lagging behind other bargaining groups. Tentative agreement is expected to be reached soon (potentially as of 4/25/2023).
- The Preschool model has changed from a 4-day per week model with half day sessions to a 5-day per week model that includes both half and full-day programs. Services are mandated to commence for preschoolers as early as 2 yrs, 9 months of age. Services have increased from 65 to 73 children. 14 “walk-ins” from the fall have increased to 18 in March.
- Starks asks about ESSER grants. Smith states that these federal funds have allowed schools to offset the financial challenges brought on by the pandemic. The funds, Blair notes, must be used by September 30, 2024. (*Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund: A federal program administered by the Department of Education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The program provides emergency financial assistance to public school districts across the country.*)
- Chapter 70 funding increased by over \$800,000 last year. The new state budget increases the amount in the new year by over 15%, amounting to over \$2,000,000. This is the largest historical increase received according to Smith.
- 27.4% of the entire ELPS student body, as recently redefined by the state, qualifies as low income.

- 20.9% of the student body qualifies as students with disabilities. Education for this segment of the student body is being addressed through either Individual Education Plans, mainstreaming through regular education, and seeking different settings within the mainstream.
- Starks asks about a partnership with River Valley. Smith states that it is still ongoing and beneficial. Increased professional development should, however, reduce the number of referrals, but it will take time. Blair states that ELPS were able to secure therapy services when other school districts have been unable to due to increased demand. White asks if the “Tuition” line item in the proposed budget refers to River Valley. Smith replies that it is not and that the service fees go through a family’s private insurance.
- Smith discusses the overall budget development process and highlights that the local contribution to the proposed budget actually decreases.
- Blair notes that a few open positions have been eliminated with no impact on existing employees.
- Starks asks about the student population. Smith states that we are back to pre-pandemic numbers.
- White mentions that the overall proposed budget being limited to 3.9% increase in these times is impressive. Smith mentions that it was due to the efforts of the School Committee. Thompson mentions that it is partially strategic in nature considering the financial impact of the proposed new high school.
- Starks asks about school choice. Blair and Smith state that it’s our third year participating. We focus on grades where enrollment is down, emphasizing lower grades. Starks asks if the amount of reimbursement remains at \$5,000 per student which Smith & Blair confirm. We currently have 33 students opting in to ELPS and 26 going to outside districts, a differential of +7 students.
- Starks asks about out of district programs for students who require it. Circuit Breaker is a state program safety net that helps the Town to offset 75% of expenditures above \$47,000 per student. Blair reviewed the expenditures, the funding sources for Special Education and how the budget is developed for the upcoming fiscal year. Thompson states that Circuit Breaker is a look-back program that is managed by Blair.
- Page asks about School Choice. Smith answers that it must be used in a public school. The majority of students opting for this program are in high school.
- Page asks about EESER III. Blair replies that it is a large grant program at \$2,230,447 with \$1,862,197 still available. \$1.6 million will be rolled over. Smith states that the district is using ESSER to set them up well into the future. However, it does carry personnel salaries funded through it, but they are moving away from that as the ESSER program concludes.
- Thompson mentions that 3 permanent subs/paraprofessionals whose salaries are paid through ESSER will be at each grade school. They will be on the operating budget in future years. Having these substitute teachers will be helpful with scheduling and filling in when teachers are required at meetings.
- White asks if we have a focused grant writer on staff. Smith states that we do not, but that grants are written by various personnel, including school principals and others. Blair mentions how significant and helpful these grants are. Thompson states that we know of and are awarded the large grants available. Smaller ones might be missed without a focused grant writer.
- Page asks about athletic fees. Smith mentions that fees have not gone up in 20 years. Page says that there is a deficit due to this. Blair discusses overall athletic program costs and revenue to

offset. Thompson states that accessibility to all students is encouraged and that the philosophy is not to have cost as a reason for lack of participation.

- Page mentions that the Town Council has recommended an increase in pay for the school committee.
- Starks states that she sees no need for a return visit by Smith and Blair.
- Richards mentions the need for the para / substitute teacher positions.
- Thompson mentions the May 18 School Committee meeting and welcomes everyone to attend.

Starks provides a brief overview of next meeting's agenda. White motions to adjourn, seconded by Seyler. Voting YES to adjourn were Hill, Seyler, Starks and White. The meeting adjourned at 2:47pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jim White