

**Budget Committee Meeting
Stafford Board of Education
Stafford Elementary School Library
Monday, October 21, 5:00 PM**



Committee Members Present (in person):

Ms. Shana Boland
Ms. Erica Bushior, Committee Chair
Mr. Chris Paradiso

Also Present:

Dr. Laura Norbut, Interim Superintendent of Schools
Ms. Vicki DeSantis, Director of Finance and Operations
Mr. William Hoff, Interim Business Manager (via Zoom)

1. Call to Order

The committee meeting was called to order at 5:03 p.m.

2. Update on Hiring

Dr. Norbut and the committee members welcomed Ms. Vicki DeSantis, Director of Finance and Operations, and Dr. Heather Jacobi (in the audience) to the district. Dr. Norbut explained that Dr. Jacobi will begin her position as Interim Chief Academic Office in early November.

Dr. Norbut shared that interviews were conducted today to fill the position of Payroll and Benefits Coordinator. The interview process is ongoing. She explained that hiring a Payroll and Benefits Coordinator was preferable to utilizing a payroll service company.

Open positions were discussed, as well as the use of contracted services to fill certified vacancies and paraeducators. Ms. Bushior asked about the use of contracted workers for Pupil Services vacancies. Dr. Norbut explained that the School Psychologist positions at the middle and high school and the Speech Language Pathologist position (split between the middle and high school) utilized contractors, but that the role of the Special Education Teacher is intended to be filled by a permanent employee.

Ms. Bushior also asked about the progress in attaining an Athletic Trainer. Dr. Norbut shared that, although a contract was signed with Go4 Healthcare, the candidate they anticipated coming to Stafford was placed in another school district. She explained that the company is contacted on a regular basis and has not been able to provide us with a candidate at this time.

Mr. Paradiso asked about recruiting candidates for open positions from Massachusetts. Dr. Norbut detailed the current recruitment efforts that include a potential partnership with UCONN for student teachers as interns, and our attendance at job fairs. Mr. Paradiso suggested contacting the local ambulance provider to see if there is a staff person who may want to work per diem as an Athletic Trainer. Dr. Norbut said she would look into the possibility, but having someone per diem at every game may provide a scheduling challenge. Ms. Bushior suggested that the budget line for Athletic Trainers may need to be increased. Dr. Norbut shared that the district is hopeful to increase the marketability of working in the district when the SEA contract is ratified and the terms can be highlighted.

3. Update on SEA Negotiations

Dr. Norbut shared that negotiations are ongoing after three meetings. She explained that they were hopeful to be wrapping up in the near future, and that the agreement has not been ratified at this time.

4. Discussion Regarding Minimum to Maintain Budget

Ms. Bushior started the discussion by stating that it was understood that true budget numbers for contractual salary increases were not going to be known until the SEA contract is ratified. Dr. Norbut reviewed the draft of the budget timeline and detailed the budget assumptions and mandated/contractual budget drivers (as provided below).

Budget Assumptions

- Costs associated with meeting student needs will continue to rise
- Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) Educational Cost Share (ECS) Grant remained the same for FY 2025 and then will reduce each of the following seven (7) years
- Unfunded mandates will continue to be legislated by the CSDE
- CSDE Excess Cost Grant reimbursement legislatively mandated at a higher percentage than received by the district

Mandated/Contractual Budget Drivers

- 25-26 contractual salary increases
- Health insurance increases
- Special education outplaced contracted staff services
- Transportation contract increases (M&J costs are increasing by 3% per the contract we have with them)
- Building maintenance and repair
Example: In 2022, Public Act 23-167 codified ventilation assessments at each school building under jurisdiction of local and regional boards of education. We will need to complete one school each year for the next four years. (unfunded mandate)
- Costs associated with fuel and electricity

Ms. Boland asked if it was feasible to get anticipated cost share requests and MOU data from the Town in order to budget plan in an informed way. Dr. Norbut said those conversations are currently happening and more information is expected to be forthcoming from the Town.

5. Discussion Regarding the Budget Workshop

Dr. Norbut reviewed the draft budget timeline and explained the process that was being undertaken to prepare for a workshop collaboration with Board of Education members and district Administrators. She explained that Google Spreadsheets had been developed to allow for streamlining of staff and administrative budget requests. Dr. Norbut asked that the Board of Education provide an indication of the percentage of the budget change that the Board is anticipating.

Ms. Boland shared that the Board would review the items from last year's budget process that were unable to be addressed in the 2024-2025 budget. She also stated that the budget percentage change is difficult to determine without knowing what the Town is going to expect. She further discussed that she would like to hear from the Administrators about what their priority budget items are and how long the particular request has gone unaddressed. Ms. Bushior added the request that Administrators focus on needs versus wants, priorities, and creative problem solving. Dr. Norbut said the focus would also be in long term budget planning for items unable to be included in the 2025-2026 budget year.

A discussion took place regarding the need to look at textbook updates and resources needed to implement programs like Amplify. Dr. Norbut said they would be looking into ways to offset these costs by reviewing current subscriptions and materials that may not be needed with the upcoming curriculum changes. Both Ms. Bushior and Ms. Boland expressed they are looking forward to bringing together the Board and Administrators in a budget workshop to produce a transparent budget. Ms. Bushior asked if the ARP-ESSER fund had been expended. Dr. Norbut shared that the funds will be fully expended by January 2025 and that the Central Office relocation is scheduled for the winter.

6. Comments from the Interim Superintendent

Dr. Norbut spoke about the need for a transparent, honest, and fair determination of the budget requests for the next cycle. She commented that it will be imperative to go out into the community again to demonstrate the reality behind the budget percent changes being requested. She added that last year's Myth versus Fact flier was a great tool to help dispel misinformation.

Ms. Boland shared that the Q&A question collection and video response was especially helpful with last year's budget. Ms. Bushior asked if feedback from the community had been received regarding the community organization outreach last year. Dr. Norbut explained that at each site there were comments made about how innovative and proactive the outreach had been. Ms. Sara Kelley, in the audience, shared that the First Selectman will also be asked to join in on the community organization outreach visits this year.

Ms. Bushior asked about the entry fees collected at some of the athletic events. Mr. Marco Pelliccia, Principal of Stafford High School, shared that it was his belief that attendance fees collected were used to offset Athletic budget needs. Ms. Bushior suggested donations could be collected at sporting events that don't currently charge admission. Mr. Pelliccia shared that, in his experience, when donations are solicited for a specific need, families and the community were more likely to donate. A discussion continued on the need to find out more about corporate or other sponsorship opportunities that could be pursued to provide for the needs of the sports teams. Dr. Norbut said she would look into the feasibility and rules/regulations regarding sponsorship opportunities.

Ms. Bushior asked about current and projected preschool enrollment data. Mrs. Calvanese, Principal of West Stafford School discussed the current enrollment and the potential impact of legislative processes as the State decides whether they will allow waivers in the upcoming school year.

7. Adjournment

Mr. Paradiso made a motion, seconded by Ms. Boland, to adjourn the meeting at 5:58 p.m. Ms. Boland, Ms. Bushior, and Mr. Paradiso all voted for the motion.

Respectfully Submitted,
Kristy Synnott, Recording Secretary

Erica Bushior, Committee Chairperson