

This document records the handwritten notes taken at CNS's five School Funding Conversations held in Spring 2011. They are approximations of comments made at those conversations by Needham residents. They do not represent the opinions of Citizens for Needham Schools.

School Department Operating Budget

Facts

District priorities stated in district goals document. Program reviews help set priorities.

The schools' energy costs are paid in the Town budget, not the School operating budget.

For the last 10 years, Needham's enrollment has been growing. When 2010-2011 juniors were in elementary school, NHS graduating class was 230 students. NHS Class of 2011 is 330. NHS Class of 2019 (grade 4 in 2010-2011) is 485. Later cohorts are all around 400.

Needham was at 80% public/20% private. Now percentage of private school students increasing (similar to ratio we saw in the previous decade.) Newman district has highest percentage of private students.

To close budget gaps, School Committee scrapes \$1000 and \$2000 chunks out of budget. Can't find \$50,000 chunks to remove anymore. School Committee recently spent an hour trying to save \$100,000. That's not fair to ask of the School Committee.

State law requires that fees collected fund only the service they are collected for and do not exceed the cost of those services. Fees cannot generate a profit.

Five-year financial forecast is not a wish list. It predicts the funding the schools will need to restore class sizes to where they were a few years ago and then maintain that level of service (no new programs, but staffing increases to keep up with enrollment increases). Does not account for funding needed to restore past cuts such as elementary foreign language.

Teacher and Admin contract: rate saver, held COLA to low-level. Steps and lanes need to be reconsidered. Perhaps go to merit pay model. Admin already not getting steps and lanes. Not yet using student growth data in teacher evaluation, but new guidelines coming from state in June, and do already use it in granting professional status

Currently handling large elementary class sizes with aides and responding to principals' requests.

Middle school cluster model is being reviewed as part of a holistic middle school review in FY 12. Will consider other models, see if other models are cheaper, more effective.

Questions

School Committee policy calls for "reasonable" class sizes for high school. But what does "reasonable" mean?

Ideas

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As a community, let's define some benchmarks: programs, services, standards (for example, class size of x) that we want our schools to maintain. If Town finances won't support those benchmarks, then we need to request an override. (Could we ever reach consensus? Will benchmarks stop us from reaching what we want, like full-day kindergarten?)

Parents could pay a "consumables fee" to help pay for paper and other school supplies. In Canada, these fees range from \$150-\$300.

Let's publicize the cuts that have been made to the schools.

Let's state the budget number we need to bring back programs. If we're going to ask for more money, we should ask for the right amount. Misti Perkins has written a letter urging the Superintendent to propose a bold budget and offering parent support for that request. If you would like to sign her letter, email Misti at perkins.misti@gmail.com.

We should ask teachers to quit the union.

Once a program gets cut, it's very difficult to bring it back.

Overrides are the only solutions to budget shortfalls that we can control.

People move to Needham because of the schools. That won't be true if the schools decline.

Local Funding

Facts

Funds raised through an operating override are available every year. That tax increase is permanent.

Funds raised through an operating override for the schools have been spent on the schools. However, the funds go into one Town coffer, and Town Meeting decides every year how to spend that money. No law ensures that funds raised through a school operating override will be spent every year on the schools.

Needham will need debt-exclusion overrides to fund the building of a senior center and renovations to Hillside and Mitchell.

FinCom has been "carefully generous" so that the schools would not need an override in difficult economic times.

Average tax bill is \$6000-\$7000. Per-pupil expenditure is \$12,000. If you have two children, you will have to pay property taxes from age 20-65 to pay for your kids' education.

Town may consider FY 12 cuts.

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Only new Town employees have moved to rate-saver plan.

Needham will not benefit from switching to state health plan. Already gets competitive rates from Metrowest plan.

Questions

Why doesn't Needham have a growth ordinance? Does the School Department communicate with the Town about enrollment?

How much money does Needham raise in hotels and meals taxes? Split is 60% schools, 40% town. According to the Finance Committee's 100th Annual Report (the letter at the beginning of the 2011 Annual Town Meeting warrant), the Town raised \$90,000 in FY 11 through the hotels and meals tax.

Should Needham reconsider its 60%/40% School/Town split in light of growing enrollment? How do we ask that question?

How do we show enough support to School Committee to have them ask for an override that allows us to do more than just tread water? Do we risk losing it if we ask for too much?

Can we do a two-year override?

Since Proposition 2 ½ does not allow us to keep up with inflation, why won't the Legislature get rid of it?

Ideas

Parents need to speak up about the school budget. Need to come to School Committee meetings and speak their mind. The FY 12 budgeting began with a public priority hearing in December (?). Only three parents attended. Finance Committee attends those meetings. If they see large numbers of parents demanding more, they will listen.

Let's get people used to the fact that we need an operating override every year.

We might face resistance if residents believe we ask for overrides every year.

The responsibility for funding the schools belongs not just to parents, but to all residents of the town. We have a social contract.

All constituencies need to know what benefit they will receive from an override.

Some older residents who don't want overrides benefitted from local funding to schools 25 years ago and benefit today because their property values have increased.

Overrides require huge amounts of effort to pass.

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Those who want to pay more for the schools should do so voluntarily but should not ask the rest of the Town to pay more.

The superintendent seems content with the amount of money the schools are receiving from the Town. Should he be asking for more?

Voters need to understand why the number 2 ½ % was chosen in 1980, why that was a meaningful number at that time, and why it is no longer an appropriate number to use in controlling taxes.

Proposition 2 ½ gives town managers some control over their taxing and spending, and it give voters the ability to express their priorities.

Parent Involvement

Ideas

Parents need to speak up about the school budget. Need to come to School Committee meetings and speak their mind. The FY 12 budgeting began with a public priority hearing in September. Only three parents attended. If large numbers of parents insist on priorities, School Department would listen.

Share the five-year financial forecast with parents – it's a striking document. Each month, write a piece for the Needham Times and school bulletins highlighting one part of the forecast, include enrollment information. Encourage parents to respond, ask questions – have a hotline to answer questions, field comments.

Parents need to be motivated to show up. Information has to be clear, easy to understand, feel relevant – not just a bunch of numbers that will go over people's heads.

Small casual gatherings are good forums to share information. School Committee meetings are not. However, School Committee open houses do provide a casual forum.

Gatherings are good, but to really spread the word, parents need to talk to friends and neighbors.

We need to get parents in the habit of voting in every April election: 15 minutes, once a year.

Private Fundraising

Questions

Resistance to overrides may eliminate overrides as a long-term option for closing budget gaps. Do private fundraising and advertising provide a better long-term option?

Would it be legal for a public school system to have an endowment?

Ideas

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Private fundraising for operating costs has to be repeated each year.

Fundraising for one cause hurts others because families have limited funds to give.

If parents donated to override campaigns, the overrides might pass.

Advertising revenue is ongoing revenue and could help close budget gaps

Private fundraising is a problem because it creates an expectation in the community that private money will fund the schools.

Private fundraising can work for one-time costs.

There are many examples of smart private-public partnerships throughout the country. We need to think about using some of them.

Special Education

Facts

This year, Wellesley's school department reported two budgets: a special education budget and regular education budget. But let's be careful and not pit one group of parents against another.

We need to work with the state to help us with special education funding.

School systems across the state are beginning to push back against tuition increases in private special education schools.

Questions

What percentage of school operating budget goes to special education (fully allocated)? According to the Finance Committee's 100th Annual Report (the letter at the beginning of the 2011 Annual Town Meeting warrant), special education costs accounted for over 25% of the School Department FY 12 operating budget.

Why aren't parents of special education students require to pay the extra costs for their children's education?

Ideas

Middle school needs support systems to help students who need organizational help. Currently, those students are identified as special needs students and receive more services than they need.

Some special education students receive services (such as free transportation) that typical students do not receive. At what point do superintendents and parents need to push back?

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Many students who need special education services are not receiving them.

State Funding

Facts

The State formula for funding schools is based on a 1993 adequacy study that determined the amount of money it took to educate a Massachusetts student; that number is called the foundation budget. The State then looked at each town and decided how much of the foundation budget that town could fund. The State pledged to fund the rest; for Needham, the State pledged to fund 17.5% of the foundation budget. However, the State never met that promise and cut funding even further in 2003. Recently, the State embarked on a five-year plan to increase its school funding to towns like Needham, with the goal of reaching 17.5%. However, the current recession halted that progress. MassBudget has produced an excellent [video](#) explaining the State formula for school funding, as well as its limitations. In "[A Bargain Not Kept](#)," the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education and The Boston Foundation explain the state formula for education funding and present its drawbacks. The MBAE and The Boston Foundation argue that the cost of educating a Massachusetts student has changed since 1993.

Needham receives State funding METCO and has received generous State funding for the work at Broadmeadow, Eliot, Newman, and Pollard.

Ideas

We should publicize how the State determines how much money Needham will get for schools.

We should not let the state off the hook for supporting Needham's schools.

The State needs to focus on creating private-sector jobs. Until there are more jobs, there won't be more State funding for schools.

Senator Ross filed a bill to help towns with special education costs, but it failed because there was no money to fund it.

New Models of Teaching and Learning

Ideas

Let's explore new models of teaching and learning, individualized learning.

If you're asking for more money, teachers ought to be doing something new and different.

25 students to Teacher A is not the same as 25 students to Teacher B.

Federal Funding

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Race to the Top funding: Needham participated in Massachusetts's application. However, Needham has declined to receive any portion of it. Getting the money would actually mean spending lots of money: monitoring programs, reporting to the governor. Also, Needham wouldn't get much of the money anyway – low-income towns will get most.

School Building

Under state funding (SBA) rules, when NHS was built, could build a building 10% larger than the largest predicted class size 10 years out. We built for 1400. There are now 1600 students there. The Needham High School population is projected to peak at 1800 in 2016-2017.

FY 12 assessments of Mitchell, Hillside, Pollard science classrooms. We plan to rebuild Mitchell and Hillside in 2016 or so, but "rebuilding" will be challenging on those sites. Assessments will tell School Department what needs to be done to keep those buildings running until more extensive work can be done.