



TOWN OF WESTON MASSACHUSETTS

FINANCE COMMITTEE

February 27, 2017

Dear Weston Resident:

At a recent School Committee meeting, attendees were interested in the Finance Committee's recommendations regarding the school budget. The Finance Committee reviews the proposed school budget every year, makes recommendations to the School Committee, and decides whether to support the school budget at Town Meeting in May. This past year, we supported the budget but expressed concerns about the rising costs despite declining enrollment in the schools. Weston has excellent highly-ranked schools that prepare our children well for their next steps in life. Our goal is to maintain that excellence while more efficiently managing our expenses.

Facts about Weston and our Schools

- Weston has the highest average real estate tax bill in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and about two thirds of these taxes go to support the schools.
- Less than one third of households in Weston have any school age children.
- Enrollment has been dropping in the schools over the past five years, yet costs continue to rise every year.
- The percentage of Weston students in private schools has remained at about 21% over the past eight years. The current number of Weston students in private schools is at its lowest point in the past eight years.
- Our school population currently consists of 8.0 % METCO students although this percentage is increasing at the younger grades. Participating peer towns tend to be around 3% (Wellesley 3.0 %, Lexington 3.6 %, Dover Sherborn 1.9%). Currently we receive approximately \$1 million reimbursement from the state for the METCO program. This does not cover even the direct costs of busing, METCO administration, and summer METCO student support programs.
- The cost per student including employee benefits has been rising dramatically. It was \$22,768 for the school year 2014-2015 (Fiscal Year 2015), and is projected to be over \$26,500 next school year.

- The School Committee reported at their January 9, 2016 meeting that we have approximately 450 FTE's (full time equivalent employees) of which 250 are faculty and 200 are not faculty.

Recommendations:

As enrollment drops, the class size policy is the mechanism that reduces the number of teachers needed per grade, and thus school costs. There is no mechanism in place that automatically reduces other school costs. The following areas are of concern, particularly as enrollment decreases.

Administration: While a certain level of administration is needed regardless of enrollment, our concern is that administrative costs are high, and still increasing. For instance, when going from FY10 to FY15 (the latest state data available), overall per pupil expense increased at a rate of 4.1% per year to reach \$22,768. However, Administration increased at a rate of 6.1%, outpacing Employee Benefits which increased at a rate of 5.9%. This occurred during a time period with inflation averaging around 1.6% per year coupled with an enrollment drop of 126 students. We need to understand why costs continue to increase. Can we reduce administration?

Leadership Structure: The leadership structure in our schools is undergoing a process review, but it is critical that cost effectiveness also be reviewed at the same time. Leadership stipends and differentials are greater than at our peer districts. Supervisors total 9.5 FTE's, which doesn't include administrators or curriculum support staff. At the middle school and high school, grade leaders and department heads get both a stipend as well as class time relief for their leadership positions, unlike most other towns.

Technology: The Technology budget has increased 18% over four years (from FY14 to FY18), while enrollment is projected to decline by 10%, resulting in an increase of 31% per student. While some of these costs are one-time expenses, many are not.

We recommend that the Technology Dept. develop a 5 year plan that reins in cost, that technology upgrades be performed only for classrooms that will be used, that outsourcing be considered wherever possible, and that benchmarking with other towns be done. We also believe that the Schools need to show the benefits of technology rather than simply responding to any requests from staff. In other words, as our Technology budget has soared, what have we gotten for it?

Buses: We have seen a drop of 211 children from FY13 to FY17, with a further drop projected for next year. This should result in fewer buses being needed. We recommend reviewing the bus routes to provide for possible savings.

Enrollment Projections: Enrollment can be very volatile. Since we are a small district, a small shift in enrollment matters a lot. The budget is set prior to kindergarten enrollment for the following year or before summer move-ins. These numbers need to be managed after budget is finalized but prior to the start of the school year, so appropriate measures can be taken if needed, while still adhering to the adopted class size policies.

School Space: As enrollment drops, planning should take place regarding unused space in our schools, as well as determining the appropriate building for school administration. Can administration be housed in empty school space?

Future Planning: As enrollment continues to drop, we need to be doing some long term planning to handle fewer students while still providing an excellent education. At some point, should we restructure Woodland and Country Schools so that one houses preK-1 and the other houses grades 2-3? This would allow more cost-sharing of fixed costs, and also make it easier to drop a section if needed.

Similarly, the 8 day rotation at the high school is expensive. And having different schedules for the high school and middle school as is currently the case limits teacher and class sharing that could occur between the two schools. The current system restricts the ability of teachers to teach at both schools, which may be desirable as enrollment decreases. It also restricts the ability of middle school students to take courses at the high school, which has been an issue.

Conclusion:

Weston has long enjoyed a reputation as having excellent schools and we all want to preserve that. We all agree that small class sizes are desirable within reason. But we believe that there are ways to be more efficient in running our schools, particularly in the administrative and supervisory areas, while still providing an outstanding educational experience. We need to rethink the infrastructure. The current model makes it easy to cut classroom teachers as enrollment drops, but does not address semi-fixed costs. What are other peer towns doing that we are not, that allow them to provide a high quality education at a lower cost?

Finance Committee, Town of Weston

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