

**Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee (ABRSC)**  
**FY20 Budget Saturday Meeting**  
**Approved MINUTES**

**Library**  
**R.J. Grey Junior High School**  
**16 Charter Road, Acton, MA**

**Saturday, January 26, 2019**

**8:30 a.m.**

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*Members Present:* Diane Baum, Michael Bo, Mary Brolin, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer (8:35 a.m.), Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, Angie Tso (8:35 a.m.), Eileen Zhang

*Members Absent:* none

*Others:* Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino and approximately 30 members of the public including Selectmen and Finance Committee members from both towns

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The ABRSC was called to order at 8:32 a.m. by Chairperson Diane Baum.

**1. Welcome and Introductions –**

*Diane Baum, ABRSC Chair; Peter Light, Superintendent*

The Superintendent thanked the School Committee members for volunteering to serve their communities in this important role. Everyone in attendance - Committee members, staff and the public, was invited to introduce themselves.

**2. Budget Overview (Panel 1)**

*Peter Light, Superintendent; Dave Verdolino, Finance Director; Marie Altieri, Deputy Superintendent*

- a. Budgetary Vision and Alignment with District Goals - *Superintendent Peter Light*
- b. Budget Overview and Assessments
- c. Staffing Update

***Discussion Recap:***

Re: revenues, a member conveyed a request from the teacher's union to speak to the School Committee at a future date on the MTA's response to proposed changes in the Foundation Budget.

Marie explained the thinking behind building the budget for salaries and the rationale behind recent adjustments to salary line items such as the vacancy factor and assumptions around use of subs. She noted that \$80,000 for the new capital manager position is included. A member requested that 5-year data be presented in pie-chart form (slides 26-27). A member asked how recent is the information on slide 60 re: SAT data for AB. The data is from 2017, which is the most recent year the DESE has posted.

The Committee discussed implications of continuing to level-fund OPEB vs. doing more. Dave explained that non-certified staff are covered by Middlesex Retirement, as mandated by law. The District pays 50%

of retirement benefits. Those future costs can be determined now so the district is prepared for the future, and if fiscal conditions are favorable we may be able to reduce our OPEB liability more aggressively in the distant future. Few districts have supplementally funded OPEB like we have, so we are in a good position. More analysis is needed to respond appropriately.

A member asked how the changes in our planned use of E&D will affect our assessment in the future (slide 38). Dave responded that future years' assessments have not been examined in regard to possible E&D use. The Committee was reminded that it is always a balance. A Boxborough member expressed support for the proposed amount of E&D use (slide 43) because it helps the Town of Acton get to where they need to be in Fy20 and she appreciates that. Her concern is that significant future increases are being projected in each town and with the Regionalization cost-shift ending, citizens need to be aware of what is coming.

Re: Slide 28, a member noted how the addition of the Health Savings Account (HSA) has provided significant cost savings for the District.

A member noted our high student-teacher ratio as compared to our comparable communities (slide 60) and asked how the district achieves such strong performance results with this ratio. Marie noted how the key to lowering this ratio is to lower class size and how reductions in class size significantly impacts the District's budget. That discussion is the purview of the School Committee. The District has done some of this over time. The coaching model positively impacts student performance. The District's lower certified staffing number is paired with our high number of assistants, and there is discussion around the role of assistants and moving to more certified teachers over time.

### **3. The Students We Serve**

*Marie Altieri, Deputy Superintendent; Dawn Bentley, Assistant Superintendent for Student Services*

- a. Enrollment
- b. Class Size
- c. Demographic Data

#### ***Discussion Recap:***

The Committee discussed the changing demographics of the District and the subsequent increased need for services that this requires. Several members noted the reduction in the number of IEPs and CASE students and concomitant rise in the number of 504s and the number of students needing support at R.J. Grey and want to be sure the district is keeping up with the services that these children need. Dawn explained the difference between the need for specially designed instruction for students with an IEP compared to students who only need accommodations through a 504 plan. Peter noted that with the wider range of learners, the focus is on the special educators working in the general education classrooms and not pulling students out. A member asked to what we attribute the reduction in IEPs and if we are perhaps seeing the positive results of increased supports as a result of the phase-in of three learning centers at each elementary school. She said there is greater awareness about 504 plans now. The Pathways and STEP program additions are an example of how we are moving to keep students in the district. Peter Light noted that Massachusetts is known for being #1 in nation for test results and those types of performance measures, but we are also leading in the equity gap between the highest performing students and the

lowest ones. We have some very wide gaps in equity for our students, and a lot of what is included in the FY20 budget tries to address these issues.

The issue of class size was revisited. A Boxborough member asked if the district was looking at balancing the needs of students vs class size. She believes smaller class sizes can make a difference in meeting students' needs. Marie Altieri explained that there is a lot of research on this and it is not very conclusive until you get to very low class sizes. We are still in the process of merging our two school districts and the current average of 21.9 students/class is a significant improvement. With more classrooms the average class size should continue to improve. The Administration will be talking to the School Committee about class sizes in the future.

Re: enrollment, a member expressed concern regarding the demand for Blanchard kindergarten, particularly given the declining projected enrollment of children living in Boxborough. Care is being taken not to overenroll there given the available space in the building.

Acton Finance Committee member Jason Cole asked about the unpredictability of the Middlesex Retirement numbers for the Town and the schools. Dave Verdolino agreed that this was complicated. OPEB - when it might be fully funded and how much it will take, will be addressed at a future meeting.

A member asked about the high percentage of English Learners (ELs) entering the District (slide 83). Dawn Bentley explained that there is no way to predict what school ELs will attend when they enroll, particularly if they register in the middle of the school year. When additional sections are opened and families register late, there's often not a lot of choice of which school has availability. Slide 73 about elementary class sections will be corrected.

A member asked why CASE transportation is going up 11% while enrollment is dropping. Dawn explained that a district is leaving the CASE collaborative for transportation so that will increase the cost for the remaining districts. Dawn reminded members that the District uses CASE for students who are in specialized programs housed in district as well. Amanda Bailey from the Special Education Parents Advisory Council noted that CASE also covers the Early Childhood Program. Looking at ELs and the Early Childhood Program, it was confirmed that there is a plan to shift some staffing there.

#### **4. Goal 1 - Student Social-Emotional Needs (Panel 2)**

*Dawn Bentley, Assistant Superintendent; Keith Campbell, School Resource Officer; Andrew Shen, JH Principal; Lynne Newman, Elementary Principal; Larry Dorey, ABRHS Principal*

- a. Setting the Stage: The Larger Community Context
- b. Staffing Requests
  - c. ABRHS Counseling Support
  - d. Family Support (Wraparound) Services
  - e. School Psychologist\*
  - f. RJGJHS Special Educator- CLASS Program\*
  - g. Board Certified Behavior Specialist (BCBA)\*

h. Elementary Special Education Team Chairperson

*\*Staffing necessary to meet IEP requirements*

***Discussion Recap:***

The Superintendent thanked the panel and everyone in the district who works with our students on these important issues. Although the total needs of our students are not met with this budget, we are trying to address the most pressing needs of this group. The district intends to do more study on our social – emotional work and then develop a comprehensive plan.

School Resource Officer Campbell agreed that more resources and coverage could always be used. Andrew Shen added that this critical work is taking up more and more staff time. The Committee agreed with its importance. A member stated that prevention is key and, “It is the morally and fiscally prudent thing to do.” Increasing awareness of mental health and decreasing the stigma is important. It was asked if the decreasing number of students on IEPs might translate into increased anxiety. Dawn responded that looking at the whole child is essential. Hospitalization of students was discussed. Officer Campbell said that there has been a sharp increase in voluntary hospitalizations and shared that five out of seven days, local police are doing well-being checks at homes. Students in one of our special programs like CLASS must be looked at individually as far as programming due to their broad set of needs. The high school offers a variety of options. Larry Dorey relies heavily on the Jr High staff to help with freshmen placements.

Peter Light emphasized that no student should feel they need an IEP or 504 plan to get help with anxiety. Resources are there in both general education and special education. Superintendent Light recommended “The Myth of Average: Todd Rose at TEDxSonoma County”, a YouTube talk about what it means to be average. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eBmyttcfU4>) He urged everyone to stop thinking about average and how to teach to it, and instead focus on each student and how to reach them.

***LUNCH BREAK***

**5. Goal 2 - Equitable Opportunities to Learn (Panel 3)**

*Dawn Bentley, Assistant Superintendent; Deborah Bookis, Assistant Superintendent; Dana Labb, Elementary Principal; Heather Haines, Mathematics Coordinator*

- a. Setting the Stage: District-wide Data Inquiry Team – *Heather Haines*
- b. Budgetary Requests – *Dana Labb*
  - Clean organized vs cluttered style – what makes you comfortable to use?
  - i. Field-trips and Supplies
  - ii. Anti-Defamation League: A World of Difference Program
- c. Staffing Requests
  - i. Student-Centered Instructional Coaching System
  - ii. Shift to Library/Media Specialists

***Discussion Recap:***

Members discussed how the district defines equity. A member stated that we have too many students for instruction to be too individualized. She added that some don't need academic help, but a lot of kids are very challenged in the classroom. How do we make sure the equity works for them? Dawn Bentley stated that we try to reduce the gaps that currently exist regarding how students are performing. A member added that the coaching model seems excellent but is very time intensive. In response to a member's comment on using coaching as a response to teachers who may need additional support, Dawn stressed that it is not an evaluative process. It is very important to keep it separate from the educator evaluation system to maintain the validity and support. Deb Bookis added that the district has a mentor program for teachers identified as needing more support. Many of our comparable districts have coaches, not assistants. AB is on the late end of getting this activity going.

A member stated that the World of Difference curriculum seems to have been very well received and noted that it also falls under goal 3 – Our students will have safe and effective learning environments.

**6. Goal 3 - Access to Safe and Effective Learning Environments (Panel 4)**

*Peter Light, Superintendent; JD Head, Director of School Operations; Dave Verdolino, Finance Director; Marie Altieri, Deputy Superintendent; Amy Bisiewicz, Director of Educational Technology*

- a. Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)
  - i. Setting the Stage: Capital Planning Overview
  - ii. Funding Plan - Bonding & Stabilization Fund
  - iii. Yearly Projection Detail
  - iv. Project Manager
- b. Facilities and Maintenance- Floating Custodian
- c. School Security
- d. Technology
- e. Transportation
- f. Building Project Update

***Discussion Recap:***

Paul Murphy was on the Capital Subcommittee and supports establishing the stabilization fund, sooner rather than later, because we know there will be some turnbacks that the district can consider making. He asked what the risk is if the projections don't pan out as expected. Dave Verdolino responded that that risk is being mitigated by waiting until May to see where we stand in terms of turnbacks. Calling it "vital", Mary Brolin was "so excited about this Capital Plan finally and with a funding strategy". She thanked the Capital Subcommittee members.

The committee discussed how the CIP projects were selected (slide 173). The starting point was the original list from the Dore & Whittier study. JD Head explained that these were the highest priority projects from the list that have not yet been addressed. Some are safety issues and some asset protection projects. Re slide 196, technology and specifically the age of our wireless controllers was discussed. Amy Bisiewicz said they are around 10-15 years old now and the district cannot upgrade some equipment due to these aged controllers that need to be replaced. Amy tries to go as long as appropriate when requesting new equipment. It depends on the budget and how the tech market evolves. It has been a deliberate

decision to fund this type of technology out of the operating budget, but she has to be sure the funds are set aside for it.

In response to a question, JD Head explained that any playground with equipment is required to have an acceptable fall zone. We use a biodegradable wood chip fiber. The budget does not include funding for large playground equipment, which is why parent groups often fundraise for them. Funding is included for repairing/maintaining the equipment. There are some solar panels on our buildings but there will be many more in the new building.

Angie Tso stated that she is new to the area and the Committee, and has some concerns about the high taxes in Acton and our low per pupil expenditure amount. She emphasized a comment by the Superintendent at the beginning of the morning that your values are shown in your budget. She felt the proposed budget and all of the information and work was great.

Acton Finance Committee member Steve Noone asked if there was anything in the Capital Plan that was not in the Dore & Whittier report. JD replied that 99% of it was in the original Plan. Steve asked Dave Verdolino to send 5 year plan numbers, as best he can, for the Finance Committee's document. Steve concluded that this is his 14<sup>th</sup> ABRSD Budget Saturday and he never thought he would see a 2% increase in the school budget and a comprehensive Capital Plan both in the same year. He was very supportive. Acton Fincom member Jeff Bergart cautioned the Committee to be sure all elements in the Building proposals meet the MSBA requirements to be sure they are reimbursable by the state. Going outside of the guidelines (unless there is real justification for it) would mean a lot more for taxpayers to cover. Marie Altieri acknowledged that the district knows they will go over the 8% for capital site work planning. In addition, if there are 2 offices in building, MSBA might pay for only one, but they are working their way through this analysis in the coming months and the community will be made aware.

## **7. School Committee Discussion and Preliminary FY20 Budget VOTE**

Members' comments included:

- Money is going exactly where it needs to go. The administration has thoughtfully kept students' needs in focus. Seeing the staff all work so well together today shows how collaborative the team is.
- Regarding the Health Insurance Trust, there are healthy funds however it is also because the school and town administrators negotiated with the members. We are doing a lot in areas to be fiscally prudent but also bringing such innovation to the classroom, thinking about all students' success.
- A new member appreciated all of the clear and accessible information. She stressed that it is not enough to be #1 because the repercussions to the students who don't achieve success are so heartbreaking and compelling.
- It was appreciated that the material was so thoughtfully laid out about why the district is doing what they're doing.
- Another new member expressed some frustration about lack of input into the budget process, and the appropriate time to do so. He asked that for the FY21 budget season the school establish a

clear way for School Committee members and the public to provide comments for consideration. Two other members agreed about more community input and engagement in the process.

- The per pupil expenditures could be presented as a pie chart so people can see where their tax dollars go. This would help them to understand the budget better.
- A member wanted to include the funding of playground equipment in the school budget.
- A veteran member was “grateful for a healthy and robust budget”. She knows how hard it is to get everything that should be included. She would like to see more initiatives to address learning but she understands why they are not included at this time.
- A veteran member reminded the Committee that the budget process is a year-long process. Members need to rely on the professional expertise of our administrators and staff to tell them what they need. In her opinion, parents have a lot of voice in the community. At some point, budget needs must be filtered through the professional voice.
- One member commented that the ideal budget reflects a balance between fairness, fiscal concerns and administrative concerns, and this budget does all of that. The Capital Improvement Plan is a “sea change in how we address capital. It is bold and visionary.”

John Petersen spoke from the audience about the difficulties of some long term discussions of resource allocations due to the 3 entities that will always be involved – the Town of Acton, the Town of Boxborough and the Regional School District. He reminded the Committee that the budget motion will be brought to the Town Meetings by the School Committee, but it is the Committee’s responsibility to determine if there are sufficient resources in the two towns to fund the proposed budget and have it be sustainable.

Adam Klein moved, Paul Murphy seconded and it was unanimously,

**VOTED:** That the total appropriation for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District for the fiscal year of July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020 be set at \$90,982,111, 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** \$61,235,254 (consisting of a Capital Assessment of \$2,726,396 and an Operating Assessment of \$58,508,858); and

**Boxborough** \$11,522,285 (consisting of a Capital Assessment of \$384,822 and an Operating Assessment of \$11,137,463);

with the remainder to be accounted for by the following sources of funds:

Anticipated Chapter 70 Aid in the amount of \$15,187,441,

Anticipated Chapter 71, Section 16C Transportation Aid of \$1,907,131,

Anticipated Charter School Aid in the amount of \$30,000,

Anticipated Federal Medicaid Reimbursement of \$200,000,

Anticipated Investment Earnings of \$200,000,

Estimated Miscellaneous Revenues of \$10,000, and

A transfer from E&D Reserves in the amount of \$690,000.

Paul Murphy moved, Tessa McKinley seconded and the ABRSC unanimously adjourned at 3:26 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: agenda, FY20 Budget Binder and Presentation Slides