

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TOWN OF FAIRFIELD

APRIL 4, 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT2xDZre2xA>

A Meeting of the Town of Fairfield was held on Tuesday, April 4, 2023 at 7 PM at 501 Kings Highway East & via Webex.

The meeting was called to order at 7 PM by Moderator Mark McDermott.

PRESENT: 28 ABSENT: 12 VACANCY: 0

PRESENT: Longo, Furey, Ruggiero, Gerber, McCormack, Galdenzi, Lambert, Pistilli, Karson, McCabe, Spolyar, Zezima, Garskof, Siebert, Wolk, Gale, Havey, Kuhn, McDermott, Vergara, Wackerman, Ference, Iacono, Meyers, Brown, Scinto, Astarita, Britton

ABSENT: Bateson, Furey, Perham, Steele, Durrell, Barahona, Berecz, Graceffa, Georgiadis, Horton, Sparacino, Tallman

ITEM NO. 1 ON CALL: PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE & MOMENT OF SILENCE

Moderator Mark McDermott led the Body in the Pledge of Allegiance & Moment of Silence.

Board of Education: Superintendent Michael Testani gave the [BOE Presentation](#) noting that it is structurally balanced, strategic, uses offsets and current resources to build on current investments and limits increases to critical mandates. The proposed budget was \$210,695,578 or a 4.05% increase; the BOS reduced it to \$210,195,578 and the BOF approved \$210,163,443 or a 3.79% increase. Per pupil expenditure is \$21,581. The teachers' contract will expire and will impact next year's budget; teacher compensation is currently not competitive in Fairfield County and that must be taken into consideration with planning for next year.

Ms. Spolyar asked about the DEI Director's position being cut and how this will be addressed. Supt. Testani said two vendors will provide the framework and change how we operate over the next 14 months. She asked if anything was missing from the budget. Supt. Testani said addressing students' mental health needs will always be a challenge as we try to be more proactive than reactive.

Ms. Zezima questioned the non-lapsing account and what purpose it will serve. Courtney LeBorinous, BOE CFO said the BOE applied for and received FEMA funds for PPE & sanitizing supplies. The funds were received last week and now the Boards have to determine how that will be accounted for as there are audit questions; currently there is no non-lapsing account. Supt. Testani explained there are ARPA funds in some buckets for social-emotional learning that are one-time expenses.

Mr. Astarita questioned what appears to be 11 additional staff. Supt. Testani said they are reallocating 11 teachers on special assignment that will be converted to assistant principals in the elementary schools; headcount will remain the same in that area. Ms. LeBorinous said overall headcount increase is 10.85. Supt. Testani said the elementary program facilitators lack the ability to evaluate teachers and the teachers need support.

BOE Chair Jenn Jacobsen explained there was some staff in ARPA funds that will be pulled out so they don't create a cliff. There was also some reorganization in central office.

Mr. Astarita asked if there were projections for future special education costs/needs. Mr. Mancusi said they are receiving more referrals as students with mental health crises have increased while there is also a staff

shortage in some of those areas. Ms. Jacobsen noted they are trying to build more in-house programs in conjunction with other town boards and have right-sized the tuition. By adding ELA or CSC it's an offset to an outplacement.

Ms. Gale said there is a 26% increase in special needs is there a way to get a breakdown of the actual needs of the students. Supt. Testani said it would be impossible to cut staff at the high school because of the students' needs. They advocate for them by adding social workers, etc. as the community knows there have been losses due to student mental health needs.

Mr. Meyers asked if our spending is higher than comparable towns. Supt. Testani said we need to be more competitive with teacher compensation. The district is making every effort to effectively meet student needs. He hopes the assistant principals will have a trickledown effect. Mr. Mancusi said special education costs can be unpredictable and there's a lot of volatility.

Mr. Wolk asked what the budget reduction was. Supt. Testani said there was a cut of \$500,000 and an adjustment by the BOF on the pension. The BOE had used insurance numbers from the State and they have been updated to about \$500,000 so it's a wash.

Mr. McDermott asked how many retirements are projected. Ms. LeBoriosis said 19 were projected and 11 have been received as of last week.

Mr. Gerber asked about teacher retention. Supt. Testani said we must attract and retain teachers; currently with a master's degree starting salary is \$52,000. We are competing from the same pool of candidates that other Fairfield County towns are like Norwalk, Stamford and Trumbull. Mr. Gerber asked if the amount of paperwork and IEP load the same. Supt. Testani said that despite the superintendents asking for a statewide phased-in rollout the new State program is a required online platform and referrals require more paperwork. Mr. Mancusi said they have made their internal special ed meetings shorter so the teachers can become more acclimated with the system. Human Resources is also conducting exit interviews with teachers.

Ms. Iacono complimented Supt. Testani and the BOE on their hard work on the paraprofessionals' contract which is reflected in this budget and appreciates that it looks to the future making students the #1 priority.

Ms. Karson asked where most social-emotional issues are with the students. Supt. Testani said it starts in elementary school. Some are control issues that started during Covid-19 while some that existed prior to Covid-19 have been realized.

Ms. Brown asked how outplacement costs are controlled. Ms. LeBoriosis explained the history and proposed legislation regarding excess cost and how the number fluctuated year to year and not knowing the reimbursement number until March in the budget process. Now it is fixed at 70% which is a challenge for the district. Supt. Testani said they are reviewing what programs can be provided in house.

Mr. Britton asked about school safety and PPE compared to other area towns. Supt. Testani said the average teacher settlement is 12% over 4 years. There has been a change in demographics in town with 2,000 people moving in during the pandemic some of whom came with students with special needs so developing more in-house programs will benefit us. Ms. Jacobsen said redistricting costs will also be reflected in the FY24/25 budget and it is unknown how that will effect staff or busses. ARPA funds cannot be encumbered so those will lapse. She reiterated the district is in constant communication with police and fire regarding drills and training and cybersecurity.

Ms. Ruggiero asked if an operation audit has been considered. Supt. Testani said they are constantly evaluating their staffing model and ROI

Mr. McDermott asked if any subjects are missing due to staffing. Supt. Testani said there will be vacancies in math, science and world language. Class offerings and size in the high school are being reviewed.

Mr. Seibert asked if a benchmark is available regarding students going on to secondary school who had IEPs to which Supt. Testani said they could get a report on that.

Ms. Havey asked at what point kids are identified for the gifted program and where is the funding for same. Mr. Mancusi said the gifted program starts in grade 3 and is currently being revamped. Ms. Jacobsen noted the gifted and STEAM allocations on page 16 for the various schools.

Ms. Zezima asked what the negotiating power is for outplacement tuition to which Supt. Testani said there is no negotiation as they know what the costs are when the referral is made and the district pays accordingly. Ms. Zezima asked where within the DRG the district is with the budget increase. Ms. Jacobsen said the DRGs are not really used anymore, but the average BOE ask increase was 4.76 in DRG B and 4.15% in DRG A.

Ms. Gale suggested working with the universities in town regarding externships within the district. Mr. Astarita asked if test scores were available to which Supt. Testani said they are available on the State Dept of Education website.

ADJOURNMENT:

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 8:58 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth P. Browne, MMC, MCTC
Town Clerk