



## **Town of Wilmington**

Finance Committee

121 Glen Road Wilmington, 01887

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TOWN OF WILMINGTON, MA

### Finance Committee Meeting

February 29, 2024

Finance Committee Vice-Chairman, Theresa Manganelli called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm. Members present were Vice-Chairman, Marianne Gallezzo, Secretary, Chris DiOrio, Brad Jackson, Andrew Levigne, Joseph Lavino, Scott Neville, and David Tamang.

Present in interest: Louis Cimaglia IV, Temporary Town Manager, Glen Brand Superintendent of Schools, Paul Ruggiero, Director of Administration and Finance.

Absent: Finance Committee Chairman, John F. Doherty III and Chris DiOrio.

Ms. Manganelli informed the audience that public comments would be limited to three minutes.

#### WILMINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Dr. Brand introduced himself and Paul Ruggiero to the Finance Committee. Dr. Brand acknowledged the committee's involvement with the school system and distributed a presentation packet. Dr. Brand shared new information happening in the district, including a newly created brochure providing a glimpse of activities and offerings from the high school, a flier shared with the community highlighting Wilmington High School ranking 79th in the Boston metro area, 104th in the state and in the top 40 across the country.

Dr. Brand took the opportunity to introduce team members, acknowledging the team's effort in developing the budget. Dr. Brand also thanked the School Committee for their contribution to developing the budget.

Dr. Brand pointed out key features of the budget, including level funding of the budget as requested by the Temporary Town Manager. Dr. Brand acknowledged that the times have been fiscally challenging, especially for education. Dr. Brand stated that he had read that schools nationwide have also been faced with this challenge. Dr. Brand informed the committee that the state approved out-of-district tuition increases, and state funding had not increased to accommodate the changes.

Dr. Brand informed the committee that grant funds for positions that were introduced during covid, had run out. Dr. Brand added that the district reduced staffing by seven full-time employees, based on enrollment numbers. Dr. Brand provided an overview of the staffing trends over the past decade, stating that the needs of students have evolved. Dr. Brand detailed school staffing over the past decade, referring to the presentation distributed. General education staffing has been reduced by 25 full-time employees. Special education, educational assistance, and guidance have increased significantly.

Dr. Brand stated that the administration had provided a preliminary budget plan to the school committee in December, with a 4.34% increase over FY 24's budget. The team had met with the Temporary Town Manager in January, and it was requested that the department reduce the increase to 3.75%. Capital items that could be postponed were identified to help do this. Ms. Gallezzo asked what had been done for salary savings. Mr. Ruggiero explained that retiree's salaries were compared to the salaries of replacements and that not all resignations and retirements have been captured due to the timeline of the budget composition.

Ms. Manganelli asked how the school system determined the use of circuit breaker funding. Mr. Ruggiero stated that each year all school systems receive a reimbursement for special education tuition costs from the previous year, which the state calculates, and typically returns 75% of related costs. Mr. Ruggiero noted that the special education costs have been included in the budget, and offset by the previous year's circuit breaker funding. Mr. Ruggiero clarified that circuit breaker funding can only be carried from one fiscal year to the next.

Dr. Brand informed the committee of the department's effort to remain transparent in the development of the budget, there have been multiple public meetings, a public budget hearing, and the use of budget sub-committees. Dr. Brand acknowledged that the department makes up the largest expenditure in town, and the importance for the community to have the opportunity to understand the budget development.

Dr. Brand informed the committee that the department has been subject to inflation driving up costs. Dr. Brand noted that items as large items, and items as small as subscriptions for a technology, have increased. He added that the department is still dealing with the pressures of the pandemic and that the challenges at hand include the impact on students and learning loss. Dr. Brand added that in his opinion, schools are becoming the most important social services organization in communities, as challenges are increasing for families and students. Dr. Brand explained that two Family Engagement Specialists had been added during covid, and have remained thanks to various grants; as they have proven to be important. The two specialists are being utilized, and have been maxed out. Ms. Manganelli asked if there had been improvement for students needing learning assistance due to the pandemic. Dr. Brand informed the committee that things had been stabilizing, but from a developmental standpoint, often the population is still seeing an impact; specifically related to mathematics.

Dr. Brand spoke to the changing nature of students, noting that for the first time in history, Massachusettes have identified more than half of students are considered high needs. Dr. Brand informed the committee that the Department of Education identifies these students as English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. Dr. Brand added that Wilmington Public Schools are mirroring the state's findings. Dr. Brand explained the department's legal obligations to meet the needs of these students. Dr. Brand also explained that the students in need are not all in one place that students all have individual needs to meet and that it has been challenging for staffing and operations, resulting in the addition of six and a half full-time employees. Dr. Brand also noted that the student population in Wilmington has 29 other languages as their first language.

Mr. Lavino expressed his hesitation to categorize students into certain buckets and asked if students could be classified into more than one bucket at a time. Dr. Brand informed the committee that the term buckets, right or wrong, helpful or not, has been used as a metric to track progress and possibly receive funding. Mr. Lavino clarified that he is asking from a budget standpoint, as the total number of students facing one challenge, could in addition be counted for another. Dr. Brand noted that school districts are regularly audited for things like this. Ms. Manganelli asked if students were identified in the early stages of their education, such as kindergarten screenings, and if there were programs available to assist in learning English as a second language before the students entered the education system. A member of the school staff explained that before a student enters the district, complete a home language survey. Another staff member added that if a student is known to have a different first language, they can join early intervention programs.

Dr. Brand provided an overview of enrollment for the district, informing the committee that the decrease in enrollment has stabilized. Dr. Brand noted that projections from October 1, 2023, depict a decrease of 23 students in PreK-12 from FY24 to FY25. Dr. Brand stated that things like new school construction can contribute to enrollment numbers, piquing the interest of families looking for a new home. Dr. Brand informed the committee that the department looks closely at enrollment numbers for students in 8th and 9th grade, which shows how many students will make the decision to stay enrolled in the district for high school. Dr. Brand acknowledged a healthy number of students choosing to attend Shawsheen Tech or private institutions, however, the current retention rate is up in comparison to previous years.

Ms. Gallezzo asked how many students have returned to the district this year. Dr. Brand stated that 30 students have returned since the beginning of the school year, and 15 since October 1, 2023. Ms. Gallezzo asked to confirm that this number reflected the entire high school, and how many students have returned in the 8th and 9th grades. Dr. Brand did not have the number of students available but will provide it to the committee. Ms. Manganelli expressed her concerns with students returning, and that there were two reasons. One the student didn't have a choice, and two being that the student didn't have a good understanding of what they would be doing at the Tech. Ms. Manganelli stated that students should have a good idea of what to expect, and an effort should be made to retain students by educating them on what options they have when planning their future.

Mr. Lavigne asked if the department was still conducting surveys for 8th graders and their families, who may be considering leaving the district. Dr. Brand stated that the surveys had been put out, although the participation rate was less than 100%. Dr. Brand explained that this practice would be continued. Mr. Lavino asked what the retention rate goal was for the district, as numbers have shown 60% or so. Dr. Brand expressed that he believes it is important for students and their families to decide whether to stay in the district or not. Dr. Brand added that these numbers have fluctuated over the years, and he doesn't believe in the future that 100% of students will choose to stay in the district. Dr. Brand presented a comparison of enrollment trends in surrounding communities.

Dr. Brand continued his presentation, explaining budget drivers, most notably salary increases, and meeting contractual obligations. Mr. Jackson asked what the COLA was for FY25. Dr. Brand stated that a 3.25% COLA had been negotiated. He added that there is an expected reduction of 4.8 full-time employees, due to students phasing out. Dr. Brand noted personnel changes, and that 488.15 full-time employees are planned for in FY 25. Dr. Brand informed the committee that a large portion of the budget is contributed to supporting these staff members. Other costs that the district relies on are technology and out-of-district tuition costs. Ms. Manganelli asked when the school sets up specialists to educate students, who otherwise may have gone out of district, does the school invite other communities to fill the classroom. A staff member explained that this has been done twice over the years, as finding the right fit for a student can be difficult.

Dr. Brand informed the committee that surrounding communities are in the unfortunate position of potential operation overrides. And added that the capital plan works in conjunction with the town's 5-year capital outlay. Dr. Brand noted that the budget provides exceptional staff for students, the education of students, support for students in need, transportation, and athletics. Dr. Brand noted that the department will continue to try to keep Wilmington students and families in Wilmington. Dr. Brand thanked the Finance Committee for their time, and entertained questions.

Ms. Manganelli asked how much the changes in school times cost. Dr. Brand informed the committee that the changing school start times did not result in financial costs. Dr. Brand did note that an additional school bus had to be added to accommodate the earlier start time; now 17 buses. Mr. Ruggiero noted that the learning time had increased, as well as the teacher's workday. Ms. Manganelli asked what was added for time, on either end, for the middle school and high school, as she is aware of issues with after-school athletics. Mr. Ruggiero stated that both schools start at the same time 8:05 AM, and the middle school finishes 5 minutes earlier than the high school at 2:30 PM. Dr. Brand added that in terms of athletics, there has not been an adverse impact.

Ms. Manganelli acknowledged the pandemic opening up a lot of grant funding for positions, and asked if the positions would have been created if this funding wasn't available. Ms. Manganelli stated that grant positions sound wonderful, but can cause havoc for the budget, as once a position or service is introduced, it is likely to stay. Dr. Brand explained that he doesn't look at a grant position and automatically determines to keep the position once grant funding runs out. Only if the position fulfills the needs of students and families, the decision to keep it and add it to the budget would be determined.

Mr. Jackson asked if the literacy curriculum was considered high quality by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. A school staff member explained that this past school year, had undergone a pilot and received a grant from the Department of Education which has helped fund an early literacy screening tool, and almost the entire curriculum package for K-5 to be adopted in September. The staff member informed the committee that the department is excited about the curriculum. Mr. Jackson asked how much the grant was for. The staff member stated that the grant was for \$386,000 over three years, to be applied to materials, supplies, and training.

Mr. Jackson stated that he had spent a lot of years with the budget, as a predecessor of the school department, and recalled the time when the town had two fewer schools, and the high school was smaller, and if the town wanted to make any meaningful impacts on the cost of education, the town needs to open their eyes and see that educating 2,800 students in eight schools is the most grossly inefficient way, in an instructional perspective, relationship perspective, and from a financial perspective. Mr. Jackson respectfully noted that positions such as engagement specialists are needed because the schools don't have enough time to establish relationships before the student moves on to a new school. Mr. Jackson encouraged the room, and the community to consider the opportunity with the Wildwood School.

Ms. Gallezzo asked if the increase in the budget for bussing, was due to the additional buss to accommodate different start/ end times. Mr. Ruggiero informed the committee that the increase was due to a contractual standpoint.

Mr. Tamang asked if general education and special education are expected to see a trend to increase, and how it would impact the staffing budget. Dr. Brand explained that the ability to adjust staffing can be difficult as there are multiple locations, and can also be difficult to predict. Mr. Tamang asked for clarification, he noted the movement of full-time employees within the budget from one category to another, is a localized phenomenon to meet needs in another school or department. Dr. Brand confirmed this was correct.

Mr. Lavino asked about English Language Learning students, noting the number of students has doubled from 2020 to 2023, would students in this program be falling behind in other subjects, and would the department be paying more to get these students caught up? Dr. Brand explained that depending on the student's point of entry, language level, and robust service, students will be able to catch up and phase out of services.

Ms. Gallezzo noted that class sizes are very small and asked what was planned for the addition of electives, when some of the classes may only have four students. Dr. Brand explained that the NEASC's last review of the school was conducted in 2021 and identified that the schedule allotted classes that were too long. The coming year's schedule will shorten the class times and allow for 8 classes a day instead of 7. This will provide students with the opportunity to take more electives and lead to increasing class sizes while maintaining the same number of staff.

Ms. Manganelli asked how the department decided what electives were to be introduced, and if the middle school students had been interviewed to see what they were interested in. Dr. Brand clarified that the catalog of studies would not change, and the new schedule would afford students to take another elective.

Dr. Brand acknowledged Mr. Jackson's previous statement and offered for himself and the School Committee to meet with various boards and committees to provide a presentation regarding the Wildwood School. Ms. Manganelli asked what the next step in the process would be. Dr. Brand explained that the group is working on an educational program plan, an extensive document that details what happens within the walls of the proposed building, and is expected to be approved by the School Committee in March. Dr. Brand noted that the next six months are critical in determining possible options for the project. In August, the preferred choice of option must be submitted to the MSBA.

Ms. Gallezzo stated that the school debt override should be on the agenda for the annual town meeting in 2025.

#### PUBLIC COMMENTS

There were no public comments.

#### APPROVAL OF MINUTES

There were no minutes for approval.

#### ADJOURN

After the discussion, being no further business, a motion was made by Mr. Neville for the Finance Committee to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Jackson and unanimously:

VOTED: That the Finance Committee adjourn.

The meeting adjourned at 8:40 pm.

Respectfully submitted,



Thomas F. Donahue

Recording Secretary