

The School Committees Report

The School Committees are dedicated to supporting the school districts' educational goals for Concord, Carlisle and Boston students while maintaining a transparent public process related to policy decisions. This article is one in a series that is intended to update and inform the residents of Concord and Carlisle about the districts' on-going activities, initiatives and policies.

It's Budget Season

The School Committees are in the middle of budget development for fiscal year 2016 and they are encouraging community members to get involved in the process now and to come vote on the budgets at Town Meeting in April. This report includes background information on budget development and dates and times of upcoming forums that will include budget discussions.

Budget Process and Timeline

The annual budget process begins in June, when the school principals present their annual School Improvement Plans to the School Committees. These presentations include reviewing results from the previous year's plans. These plans are developed at each school site with input from administrators, teachers and parents. During the summer, the Superintendent and the Deputy Superintendent assess the School Improvement Plans and propose budgets to support them. These draft budgets also reflect regular and special education enrollment projections, costs associated with implementing new regulations and the districts' fixed costs. Fixed costs include contractual obligations with eight employee bargaining units, non-union employee salaries, utilities, transportation, insurance and other operating expenses.

In August, the School Committees and the school administration begin working together to fully develop budgets to address the needs of the Concord Public Schools and Concord Carlisle High School and to address the expectations of the taxpayers. In September, the School Committees and the Administration respond to information requests from the Concord Finance Committee. During October and November, the Concord Finance Committee reviews the proposed budgets from the town and the schools and makes a funding recommendation. In December, the School Committees will vote on a final proposed budget for each school district and these budgets will be presented for voter approval at Town Meeting in April.

Cost Drivers

Over the past five years, fixed costs for the Concord Public Schools grew by 3.67% on average. At the Region, the average rate of growth for fixed costs was 4.52%. These costs include salaries for 700 employees, transportation, utilities and insurance. The operating budgets also include many variable costs. The schools have experienced enrollment growth over the past five years and unfunded state and federal mandates have required training and additional staff time. Also, the school districts face unpredictable special education costs. Public schools are required to provide services to children with disabilities from age three to 21. Many of these children have complex needs and in some cases their needs necessitate out-of-district placements at high tuition rates.

Cost Reductions

In recognition of the economic downturn and the town's generous investment in school building projects, recent School Committees have endeavored to reduce budget increases. These efforts

required reductions in new programming and cuts in administrative staff and funding for educational materials. The Superintendent has led efforts to develop capacity to serve many more special education students in district which has reduced costs. In addition, the districts successfully achieved savings in energy consumption as well as printing and mailing information to parents.

The five-year average increase in operating budgets for Concord Public Schools (CPS) is 3.23% and 2.92% for the Regional District. For FY16, the School Committees are considering restoring cuts made to the budgets over the past few years and funding some new programming that was included in the School Improvement Plans.

FY16 Budget Discussions

As the School Committees continue to work with the administration to finalize the FY16 budgets, they urge residents to engage in the process at upcoming school committee meetings, school committee coffees, Parent Teacher Group (PTG) meetings and Finance Committee meetings.

Upcoming meeting dates for FY16 budget discussions include:

Thursday, November 13

Concord Finance Committee Budget Guidelines Meeting, 7:30 pm in the Selectmen's Room at the Town House

Tuesday, November 18

School Committee Community Coffee, 7pm in the Peabody Forum

Tuesday, November 25

Regional School Committee, 6:30pm in the CCHS Library

Members of the School Committees are also scheduling informal budget discussions with parent and community groups and encourage the public to contact them for more information. Meetings have been scheduled with the Alcott, Thoreau, and the Concord Middle School PTGs and additional public forums are being planned.

The School Committees Contact Information

You can link to the School Committees' emails on the Districts' home page at www.concordpublicschools.net. Or, you can email the Concord Public School Committee at concordschoolcommittee@colonial.net and the Concord-Carlisle Regional School Committee at concordcarliseschoolcommittee@colonial.net. You can reach out to the Superintendent and the School Committees through the Your Voice Matters link on the Districts' home page.

School Committee meetings are open to the public and the public is encouraged to attend. The meetings are broadcast on CCTV and are available on demand at www.concordtv.org. The district web site (www.concordpublicschools.net) contains updated reports, presentations and information on meetings.