

Warrant Committee Education Subcommittee

Joint Meeting with the School Department Administration and a subset of the School Committee

January 6, 2023 8:00 AM

Hybrid Meeting - Town Hall, Select Board Conference Room and via Zoom

DATE: February 15, 2023

TIME: 2:35 PM

Meeting Minutes

Members in Attendance

Warrant Committee Education Subcommittee: Bill Anderson, Anne Helgen, Laurie Slap, Paul Rickter, Matt Taylor, Jack Weis

School Committee: Meg Moriarty, Jamal Saeh

School Department Administration: Superintendent John Phelan, Finance Director Tony DiCologero, Assistant Superintendent Janice Darius

Others: Geoff Lubien, Town Administrator Patrice Garvin, Select Board Member Roy Epstein

Call to Order

The joint meeting portion of the School Committee meeting was called to order at 8:05 AM.

FY 2024 School Department Budget

Jack began the meeting with a summary of what the Education Subcommittee had discussed and concluded at its meeting the evening before. He stated that, with one or two exceptions, the Ed Subcommittee agreed that the budget represented a reasonable level service budget. The two exceptions he cited were the 20 new FTEs associated with the opening of the new Upper Middle School, which the subcommittee was not persuaded were all required, and the \$500,000 increase for unbudgeted hires in FY 23 – although he acknowledged that even that increase was technically level service from what is in place in FY 23. He also stated that, as already noted by some members of the School Committee at their meetings, there was no way that the town can allocate \$10 million of additional funds to the School Department in FY 24 to support the department's proposed level service budget. He indicated that the Ed Subcommittee had some thoughts and ideas about potential areas to perhaps achieve budget savings and efficiencies but that the subcommittee did not want to get out ahead of the School Department and School Committee in formulating an FY 24 budget.

Those introductory comments prompted a robust discussion about the appropriate role of the Warrant Committee and Education Subcommittee in formulating the department's FY 24 budget, with some of the attendees contending that the Warrant Committee and Education Subcommittee had no role in looking at and opining on individual line items in the department's budget. Those individuals argued that, instead, the Warrant Committee should essentially simply provide the School Committee and School Department with a total budgeted dollar amount for the department and School Committee to determine how to allocate. Others argued that while, ultimately, the School Committee and the School Department could reallocate and spend the approved funds however they chose, in order to make an informed decision as to how much money was appropriate to allocate to the department, one had to be able to see how the marginal dollars were intended to be used. Moreover, in order to decide how to allocate dollars among various departments, it was also necessary to understand how those dollars were expected to be used and what the impact on services would be if a different level of funding was allocated to one department versus another.

The conversation quickly pivoted from there to a broader and spirited discussion about the fiscal challenges facing the town in general, not just in FY 24, but in FY 25 and beyond, including the appropriate level of free cash that the town should use in FY 24 and when a potential override vote might be appropriate to place on the ballot.

In the end, while the meeting participants agreed that the discussion at the meeting was useful and necessary, it was ultimately inconclusive as it related to the FY 24 School Department budget. The concluding sentiment of the group was that the bigger-picture discussion on the townwide fiscal situation and challenges would be the focus of future discussions and meetings, beginning with the next budget summit on January 12th.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:45 AM.