

TOWN OF GROTON FINANCE COMMITTEE

Thursday, January 7th, 2016, Selectmen's Meeting Rm

Groton Town Hall, 173 Main St. Groton, MA, 6:00 p.m.

Meeting held jointly with the Board of Selectmen & School Committee

Present for Finance Committee: R. Hargraves (Vice Chair), B. Robertson, B. Pease, M. Bacon, P. DuFresne (Town Accountant, Recording)

Absent: G. Green (Chair), Art Prest, D. Manugian

Present for the Board of Selectmen: J. Degen, A. Eliot, J. Petropoulos, S. Schulman, and P. Cunningham

Also Present: M. Haddad (Town Manager), Dawn Dunbar (Executive Assistant), Kristan Rodriguez (School Superintendent), Jared Stanton (Budget & Finance Director School District), and Alison Manugian, Leslie Lathrop, Peter Cronin (School Committee Members)

Documents available at the meeting: GDRSD Needs Assessment Summary & Crosswalk
GDRSD Needs Assessment Financial Option Review

Mr. Hargraves called the Finance Committee meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

School Committee Needs Assessment Presentation: Dr. Rodriguez presented the narrative version of the Needs Assessment Summary document. She summarized the key findings:

- Must reverse declining student performance in core areas
- Must restore & improve programs to meet student needs
- Must provide comprehensive social/emotional support to students
- Must improve performance of students with disabilities
- Must provide essential support services that are currently lacking

Dr. Rodriguez believes that a root core analysis of the data shows that these deficiencies stem from the loss of staff and resources over the last several years. She stressed that additional data supporting these findings can be found in the comprehensive Needs Analysis document available on the GDRSD website, and that these findings represent true needs and not "wants."

Ms. Manugian stated that the Proposition 2 ½ limitation is a hurdle that must be overcome in order to address the district's budget needs. She explained that the state has altered its funding levels to the detriment of certain towns which are considered "wealthy." The state feels that Groton should have the ability to prioritize education spending locally if that is what the residents choose. She informed the group

that approximately 60% of the GDRSD budget is wages and salary expenses, and that this category grows by 3% annually due to contractual obligations. 14% of the budget is health insurance. Therefore, the school district budget is almost certain to grow more than 2.5% annually and this must be recognized going forward. Dr. Rodriguez outlined four (4) potential funding strategies:

- Hold town assessments at current levels and trim programs/staffing, resulting in reduced quality of education in district
- Increase town assessments for a single year to fund current needs as well as anticipated technology and capital projects.
- Increase town assessments for a single year to fund only current needs. Technology and capital project funding would be determined and addressed at a later time
- Increase town assessments for all needs (including capital and technology), however, phasing in the funding gradually over a period of years.

Dr. Rodriguez stressed that the \$1 million that was previously identified as a rollover cost for FY17 does not address any needs included in the assessment. With only this level of funding, district performance will continue to decline. Mr. Petropoulos asked for additional clarification of this point. Ms. Manugian said that growth in town assessments should not be equated to growth in the school district budget. The district budget is growing at a higher rate than the assessment increases would suggest. Mr. Haddad asked what percentage increase in the district budget is represented by the \$1 million rollover cost. Mr. Stanton said he would calculate this figure for the group as soon as possible. Mr. Robertson expressed concern that 2 of the 4 funding options presented include capital and technology numbers that have yet to be calculated. Ms. Manugian replied that option #2 (to fully fund all needs in a single year) would likely require an assessment increase of between \$5 and \$7 million. Dr. Rodriguez stressed that this would stabilize the budget and prevent additional override requests in future years. Ms. Manugian added that option #3 (fully funding current needs, excluding capital and technology) would require between \$3 and \$4 million. These estimates include the \$1 million previously referred to as the mandatory "rollover" costs. Mr. Robertson would like to see success metrics added to these proposals; he feels that this will add a measure of accountability and help citizens understand the initiatives. Mr. Cunningham would like to see the needs assessment summarized according to priority. Dr. Rodriguez said that the key findings have been categorized according to which has the most direct impact on the students' classroom experience. Staffing priorities have been clearly identified in the needs assessment, and reductions in staff correlate with lower performance. Dr. Rodriguez recommends that staff and programs previously cut be restored. Mr. Schulman expressed concern that substantially increasing personnel costs (which already make up such a large percentage of the overall budget) will only lead to further unsustainable costs in the years to come. Mr. Degen agreed that it would be useful to see the carryforward costs including benefits for FY18 including all the proposed new FTE's. Dr. Rodriguez will work on providing this figure. Mr. Degen stressed the importance of presenting a complete picture of the financial need before moving ahead with an override request. He asked whether under option #3, the towns would be asked to vote another override in FY18. Ms. Manugian confirmed that while it may not happen in FY18, it would surely happen soon. Mr. Degen said that he would recommend a gradual increase in town assessments to take place over the course of several years, especially since the capital and technology needs are not known at this point. This would help relieve the burden on taxpayers that are already struggling with

increased tax bills. He would recommend that \$2 million be brought forward over 3 or 4 years. Ms. Manugian replied that the school committee is still discussing the viability of all options, and will be seeking additional input from board members and the public.

Mr. Robertson suggested that a new baseline budget for salaries and wages be created which would determine the need for FY18 and then run that projection out for several years. This will provide the information to show the relative sustainability of the budget without additional overrides, and also provide detail about which line items can be manipulated to achieve certain percentage goals. The projection would have to be based on some assumptions that could ultimately prove inaccurate, but if the assumptions are reasonable the projection will still work. Ms. Manugian reminded the group that the school district unions are stronger than the municipal unions and therefore harder to control. However, data collected thus far indicate that school district staff are not overcompensated. She feels that as we have no control over state contributions to the budget, we must adjust local contributions instead. A 2.5% increase in town assessments does not provide a sustainable funding level; 5.5% would be more realistic. Mr. Cronin added that an override is a municipal request to the taxpayers; there are options for which those additional tax dollars can be allocated. Therefore it is not helpful to label this request a "school" override. Mr. Pease would like additional clarification on funding option #2. If this provides a large increase all at once, that would seem to be sufficient cushion to support the new FTE's. Mr. Petropoulos requested that more detail be provided on the financial impacts of all the funding scenarios over the long term. Mr. Hargraves asked for a chart showing what improvements would be forsaken if the budget needs are not fulfilled as proposed. He asked that the taxpayers be kept in mind during this process. Ms. Lathrop replied that the community must decide on the level of educational quality it desires and then be willing to pay for that.

Mr. Hargraves adjourned the meeting of the Finance Committee at 7:00 pm

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia Dufresne, Recording Secretary

OVERVIEW

At Groton-Dunstable, we have wonderful students and a strong staff. Our many successes would not be possible without ongoing support from our entire community.

Every organization has areas that can be improved upon and our district is no exception. This document is an overview of the Needs Assessment of the Groton-Dunstable Regional School District. Both this overview and the Needs Assessment are based on data current as of November 2015. The Needs Assessment does not provide information about associated costs. Budget recommendations will follow.

Major technology and capital needs are not addressed in the Needs Assessment. Technology and capital plans will be completed by spring 2016.

Throughout the needs assessment document you will see mention of Best in Class (BIC) districts. These are Massachusetts public school systems, selected for comparison due to their high performance in many areas. They represent much of what we would like to achieve.

Five key findings emerged as needs to be addressed:

1. **We need to reverse declining student performance in core areas caused by the loss of essential staffing and resources.**
2. **We need to restore and improve programs to meet the needs of students in the areas of the arts, library science, physical/behavioral health, technology and engineering, and foreign language.**
3. **We need to provide comprehensive social and emotional support to our students.**
4. **We need to improve performance of students with disabilities while meeting the needs of all learners.**
5. **We need to provide essential support services including kindergarten assistants, technology support staff, nursing staff, custodial and maintenance staff, business office staff, and administrative assistants.**

The remainder of this document will provide a summary of these key findings, supporting data, verified root causes, and recommended solutions.

KEY FINDING 1

We need to reverse declining student performance in core areas caused by the loss of essential staffing and resources.

Although Groton-Dunstable ranks above the state average in many performance areas, we have experienced performance declines in recent years.

- In 2012, the state's accountability level for the district dropped from Level 1 (highest level) to Level 2, and remains at Level 2 in 2015.
- The 2014 state accountability report shows an overall decline in district performance over three years based on MCAS data.

VERIFIED ROOT CAUSES

- Staffing cuts have resulted in large class sizes in many core classes.
- Reduction of curriculum leaders has led to decreased monitoring and coordination of core instructional programs.
- Limited funds for instructional materials have impeded alignment with current state standards.
- Professional development (PD) has not been adequately funded to enable teachers to improve curriculum implementation.

SUPPORTING DATA

- 28 core classes at the High School have over 25 students (range 26-34).
- 11 core classes at the Middle School have over 25 students (range 26-33).
- There are currently no elementary curriculum coordinators.
- District spending on instructional materials in 2014 (\$124 per pupil) is less than:
 - The state average (\$410 per pupil),
 - Best-in-class districts (\$409 per pupil), and
 - The district's FY2013 spending level (\$207 per pupil).
- Teachers who receive an average of 49 hours of intensive and sustained PD a year can boost their students' achievement by about 21 percentile points.
 - Elementary G-D teachers currently have a total of 30.5 hours and the high school has a total of 18.5 hours embedded into our calendar.
 - The amount of state-required training that must be funded by the district has increased.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

- Increase staffing to target core class sizes of no more than 25 students.
- Provide core curriculum coordination at all levels through increased staffing.
- Provide materials and resources that align with current MA state curriculum standards.
- Offer professional development program that aligns with the new, high quality professional development state standards and re-certification guidelines.

KEY FINDING 2

We need to restore and improve programs to meet the needs of students *in the areas of the arts, library science, physical/behavioral health, technology and engineering, and foreign language.*

Special subject offerings have been scaled back or eliminated, and we don't have the depth of offerings found in other high performing districts. Class sizes are above 25 students in many special subject sections.

- Staffing cuts have occurred in fine and performing arts, library, and foreign language, reducing options and increasing class sizes.

VERIFIED ROOT CAUSES

- As a result of staffing cuts, programs were eliminated, reducing the depth of offerings in the district and significantly increasing class sizes in Integrated Arts.

SUPPORTING DATA

- In FY2009, a total of four certified librarians were and replaced with library specialists, who are not certified teachers. In FY2011, the middle school library staff was further reduced to one para-educator.
- In FY2012, elementary school physical education was cut from two days a week to one day a week.
- Foreign Language at the elementary schools was scaled back in FY2009, and cut altogether in FY2010.
- Groton-Dunstable is missing programs that most other best in class districts offer to students, such as 3D art and drama. Additionally, the high school has the highest student-to-teacher ratio in music, and the second highest in visual arts.
- At the high school, there are currently nine classes with class sizes over 25, such as physical education, health, art, chorus, and transitions (college prep including college essay writing).
- In the middle school, 33 Integrated Arts classes currently have over 25 students in them.
- There are no Fine Arts and Physical/Behavioral Health coordinators.
- Foreign language stipend and grade level oversight was reduced from grades 1-12 to only include the secondary level.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

- Additional staff will allow the district to restore, expand, and strengthen program offerings.
- Additional offerings will reduce class sizes.
- Certified librarians will teach organizational, study, and research skills.
- Additional staff will allow the district to enhance elementary specialist offerings.

KEY FINDING 3

We need to provide comprehensive social and emotional support to our students.

The number of students requiring social and emotional support is growing, and students report elevated stress levels due to their academic workload. Our current social-emotional support staffing is below recommended levels.

- Staffing cuts and decreased district spending for guidance counselors have left the district with insufficient support structures to adequately address the social and emotional needs of students.
- Survey responses from parents and staff have expressed the desire to offer greater support of students' social and emotional needs.

VERIFIED ROOT CAUSES

- Based on past staffing cuts, staff members do not have consistent or sufficient support structures in place to assist students with social emotional needs.
- No past school or district plans addressed the social and emotional health of students.

SUPPORTING DATA

- The Massachusetts School Counselors Association strongly recommends no more than a 1:250 counselor-to-student ratio.
 - At Florence Roche, the counselor-to-student ratio is 1:540.
 - At the high school, the counselor-to-student ratio is 1:289.
- In FY2014, the district's spending on guidance counselors was \$185 per student, which was:
 - Less than the Best-in-Class average spending of \$508 per student.
 - Less than the FY2013 state average spending of \$206 per student.
 - Less than the FY2013 district average spending of \$257 per student.
- The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a psychologist-to-student ratio of 1:1000.
 - G-D has two psychologists; the district's psychologist-to-student ratio is 1:1286.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

- Increase staffing levels to meet the social and emotional needs of students and align better with recommended staff-to-student ratios.
- Develop a district-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) district model, to address current and future student needs to support students' social and emotional health.

KEY FINDING 4

We need to improve performance of students with disabilities while meeting the needs of all learners.

Students with disabilities have experienced declines in performance in all subject areas. Specialized staff who had provided intervention to students below grade level were eliminated in past budget cycles.

- District-wide, composite performance index scores for students with disabilities continue to decrease. State reports showed that comparable districts did not have a similar downward trend.
- 2014 MCAS data for students with disabilities was below the state average and at a 5-year low.
- The number of special education students at Groton-Dunstable has increased from 13.8 % in FY2010 to 14.8 % in FY2015.

VERIFIED ROOT CAUSES

- Although the state of Massachusetts developed a blueprint for a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in October 2011, the blueprint was only integrated into the district improvement plan this school year.
- While required IEP's and 504 plans are being met, past cuts eliminated specialized staff who had provided intervention to students below grade level.
- Failure to use data effectively in all tiers of instruction.

SUPPORTING DATA

- From FY2009 through FY2013, the district cut 2.5 reading teachers. There are currently no math interventionists at the elementary level.
- We currently only have two co-taught classes at the elementary level that offer special education and general education support in the classroom all day.
- Data is not used regularly and continuously to improve student learning because the district lacks:
 - A learning management system.
 - The resources to track assessment data over time to measure student growth.
 - A consistent universal screening measures.
 - Progress monitoring tools to determine baseline needs and progress towards benchmarks.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

- Establish a functioning Multi-Tiered System of Support (inclusive of standards-based instruction and assessment, research-based Universal Design for Learning, the Co-Teaching model, and the incorporation of Growth Mindset models) to meet the needs of all learners.
- Implement a student data management system to track performance and progress at all levels.
- Create district-wide protocols to use instructional data.

KEY FINDING 5

We need to provide essential support services *including kindergarten assistants, technology support staff, nursing staff, custodial and maintenance staff, business office staff, and administrative assistants.*

In past budget cycles, many support staff positions were reduced or eliminated in order to shift funding to maintain direct instructional services. The need for these support positions has increased, and the lack of staffing has limited the effectiveness and efficiency of our schools.

- Staffing reductions have limited the district's ability to provide adequate support services in essential areas such as kindergarten assistants and nursing.
- State requirements and recommendations have increased staffing needs in nursing, student information system management, and technology support.
- Maintenance needs for buildings (due to age) and athletic fields (due to increased usage) have both grown during recent years, while maintenance staff reductions have occurred.
- From FY2013 to FY2016, the number of student devices requiring technology support has roughly tripled; current plans to move the district to a more individualized platform will only increase the number of devices requiring support.

VERIFIED ROOT CAUSES

- Due to staffing cuts and growing needs, vital services are not being provided.

SUPPORTING DATA

- In FY2010, kindergarten classroom assistants were eliminated.
- During FY2014, the district eliminated a 0.5 Nursing Assistant position at Florence Roche.
- In FY2016, the district technology department was cut from five members to four.
- In FY2010, office secretarial services were reduced during the school year and completely eliminated during summer months.
- In early 2014, the Records Secretary was reduced from 35 to 20 hours per week.
- Presently, 18 custodians are responsible for the cleaning of our buildings. In 2009, we employed 23 custodians.
- In 2009, the district reduced the maintenance department by one person, thus providing only four people to maintain six buildings, over 90 acres of grounds, and 10 athletic fields.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

- Restore staffing cuts and build necessary systemic supports to reverse the detrimental impact such cuts have had on the overall functioning of the district.

GLOSSARY

Best-in-class: A term that is often used in the business industry to refer to companies that tend to set the standards for other companies to aspire. Best in class is typically considered a company that has set the benchmark that others in the industry seek to at least meet in order to be competitive, although the goal is often to exceed that mark and set a new industry standard. It is used here to identify consistently high-performing districts in Massachusetts, such as Concord-Carlisle, Acton-Boxborough, and Lexington.

CPI: Massachusetts uses the 100-point Composite Performance Index (CPI) to measure progress towards this goal of narrowing proficiency gaps. The CPI assigns 100, 75, 50, 25, or 0 points to each student participating in MCAS and MCAS-Alternate Assessment tests based how close they came to scoring Proficient or Advanced. (For example, all students scoring Proficient or Advanced are assigned 100 CPI points; students with very low MCAS scores are assigned 0 CPI points.) The CPI is calculated by dividing the total number of points by the number of students in the group. The result is a number between 0 and 100. A CPI of 100 means that all students in a group are proficient.

MCAS: The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, commonly shortened to MCAS, is a statewide standards-based assessment developed in 1993, in response to the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of the same year.

PARCC: The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is a consortium of states and the District of Columbia that are working to create and deploy a standard set of K–12 assessments in mathematics and English. PARCC states have developed a range of next-generation assessments to help ensure that all students, regardless of income, family background or geography, have equal access to a world-class education that will prepare them for success after high school. The new statewide test (called “MCAS 2.0”) will include MCAS and PARCC-like test questions and will begin next school year.

Accountability Level: All Massachusetts districts and schools with sufficient data are classified into one of five accountability and assistance levels, with the highest performing in Level 1 and lowest performing in Level 5. In general, a district is classified into the level of its lowest performing school, unless the district was classified into Level 4 or 5 as a result of action by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

PPI: Massachusetts uses the Progress and Performance Index (PPI) to assess the improvement of each district and school toward its own targets. The PPI combines information about narrowing proficiency gaps, growth, and graduation and dropout rates into a single number. All districts, schools, and student subgroups with sufficient data are assigned an annual PPI based on two years of data and a cumulative PPI between 0 and 100 based on three annual PPIs. For a district or school to be considered to be making progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps, the cumulative PPI for both the “all students” group and high needs students must be 75 or higher.

Core Subjects: Core subjects are defined as English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies/history, and foreign language (at the HS level).