

The Public Schools of Brookline
PLANNING GUIDELINES AND PRIORITIES for the
SCHOOL BUDGET, 2009-2010

Introduction

In anticipation of each new fiscal year, the School Committee works with the Superintendent and Senior Staff to determine the Public Schools of Brookline's (PSB's) goals and priorities, and the Superintendent and his staff then use this document to begin developing a new budget. This year, the global economic crisis has thrown unusual uncertainty into this process.

The School Committee and PSB are very grateful to the voters of Brookline for passing the Proposition 2 ½ override ballot measure last May that allowed us to extend learning time in the schools and to institutionalize an elementary world language program for grades K-6. These measures ensure that the Public Schools can continue to improve the quality of education and to make progress on core objectives of the system.

Consistent with the public's investment in the Public Schools, the School Committee also committed itself to follow the expert advice of the Override Study Committee (OSC) in addressing the ongoing challenges of budgeting during a period of growing fiscal demands – particularly from health insurance costs and special education mandates – and constrained Town revenue growth. We agreed to abide by new total compensation guidelines and to look aggressively for efficiencies in our practices. The OSC's guidance has already yielded important improvements and will continue to inform our budgeting and overall fiscal approach.

Unfortunately, the global financial crisis has since overshadowed those positive trends. Because of the recession, we enter this budgeting process having already received notice of impending significant revenue shortfalls, uncertain of the Town's likely local receipts going forward, not knowing the final level of our current year deficit and unsure of the outcome of negotiations around health insurance financing¹. With such significant uncertainties, we must recommend a very conservative approach, with new programs or increases only viable if we can match these costs by substantially reducing program expenses elsewhere.

One additional source of uncertainty regarding available resources is the possible willingness of the state legislature to enact certain of Governor Patrick's recommendations regarding the Municipal Partnership Act, which would enable cities and towns to raise additional local revenues.

¹ We note that for the Town and School system alike, should our unions agree to join the Group Insurance Commission (GIC), this change in and of itself would offer all an opportunity to reallocate substantial resources.

We also face the following local challenges:

- The continued growth of our elementary school population, anticipated to be approximately 550 Kindergarten students next fall (the 5th consecutive year of higher than average entering classes), which will result in increased numbers of classroom and specialist teachers, pressure on our existing (crowded) physical plant, the likely adjustment of our K-8 school buffer zones, and/or the need to increase our class sizes beyond what is optimal;
- The possibility of an increase in demand for mandated special education services consequent to the increase in enrollments;
- The uncertain outcome of collective bargaining in connection with the conclusion of our current labor contracts;
- Continued upward pressure of healthcare costs given our existing healthcare benefit program, as well as fluctuating costs of energy and food.

Budgeting in this Unusual Year of Uncertainty

While we are committed to the system priorities set out here, we present them with the knowledge that the resulting budget recommendations will have to include more than the usual contingency plans for unpredictable levels of continued financial upheaval.

Last year, the Superintendent developed three tiered budgets, each one making a different assumption regarding a possible outcome of the Override vote. This year, we ask the Superintendent to develop a flexible budget, allowing for different levels of revenues forecast by the Commonwealth and our Town. To ensure consideration of all options and coordination with ongoing efforts of the Town's Efficiency Committee, as well as the soon-to-be-finalized PSB Strategic Plan and Facilities Master Plan, the Finance subcommittee Chair will work particularly closely with the Superintendent and his staff this year as we attempt to determine what actions we might take that would be the least damaging to sustaining our organizational values.

Guidance from the Strategic Planning Process

The PSB is close to completing both a Strategic Planning process and a Facilities Master Plan. When approved by the School Committee, the Strategic Plan will establish a 10-year vision for the PSB as well as concrete, measurable and achievable 5-year goals by which to guide formulation of budgets and policy, thereby affecting all areas of administrative and educational practice. The Facilities Master Plan, likewise, will set out a 10-year agenda for

facilities, but more important, it will guide facilities options over the next decade so that we may make the most effective use of our physical plant to meet the educational needs of our growing student population.

This budget document has been informed by the Strategic Planning process over the past many months and includes items that support the newly developed vision² and freshly articulated core values³. Moreover, our budget priorities and directives flow from the discussions of the system goals that have gone into the Strategic Plan. In particular:

- 1) The development of the budget must be guided by sound practice and research supportive of educational excellence and not simply historical patterns of expenditure. While desiring to continue to introduce innovative programs and initiatives, we require the administration to scrutinize the efficiency as well as the efficacy of our current programs. We congratulate senior staff, in addition to our principals and our headmaster, all of whom during this past year implemented a series of changes in organization and program which have enhanced the quality of student learning while reducing the resources necessary to produce this result.
- 2) We will continue to encourage the use of data to inform practice in all aspects of the educational process.
- 3) We continue our commitment to the objective of maintaining class sizes of no more than 25 in grades 4-12, and smaller class sizes in grades K-3. These are objectives, not mandates, and in the current budget climate and given the crowding in our facilities, we suspect that it may not be possible for the Superintendent to meet these goals in the next budget year. In this regard, the Superintendent will provide the Committee with class-size projections, a staffing analysis, and make recommendations to address any inequities for any of the budget alternatives presented.

Budget Priority Areas

As noted above, the School Committee has benefited from the discussions within the Schools and with the Community regarding the Strategic Plan. The following Budget Priority Areas reflect those discussions, the Strategic Plan's areas of focus, and our Core Values, while continuing to honor the priorities following from the Override and the OSC's report.

² The Public Schools of Brookline; Dynamic, Collaborative, Equitable; Engaged with the Community; Contributing to the World

³ High Achievement for All; Excellence in Teaching; Collaboration; Respect for Human Differences; Educational Equity

Improve Student Achievement

- Continue developing curricular assessments K-12 that reflect Brookline Learning Expectations to supplement and make up for gaps in our understanding of student achievement left by the limitations of mandated standardized tests;
- Enhance/improve curriculum K-12 to ensure development of critical thinking and analytic skills.

Educational Equity for All

- Provide support and training for inclusive classrooms (e.g., provide professional development necessary to increase the capacity of classroom teachers and specialists to meet the needs of our diverse student population in regular education classrooms);
- Reinvigorate and fund Equity Project goals pertaining specifically to the achievement gap, raising the achievement of all underachieving students, and promoting, through professional development, greater understanding of socio-economic, racial and cultural differences within our educational community.

Ensure a Culture of Continuous Improvement

- Ensure adequacy of resources to implement the Strategic Plan, especially those aspects pertaining to data collection and analysis that enable us to assess our progress;
- Continue to implement recommendations arising from Program Review.

System Goals

In prior years, this document has asked the Superintendent to achieve certain specific PSB goals. With the Strategic Plan now approaching completion, the Superintendent and the School Committee will communicate in due course the goals laid out in the Strategic Plan, the actions planned to meet them, and the metrics and methods by which the system will be held accountable to the Strategic Plan. The School Committee does not believe this budget document should attempt to pick and choose from the Strategic Plan or preempt its process by setting out goals for the next year before the Plan is finalized and released. Instead, we merely repeat that in setting the year's goals the Superintendent and his staff should pay particular attention to the priorities we have listed above and to the 5-year outline of the Strategic Plan.

Identifying Potential Savings and Maintaining Good Budgeting Practice

Given the severity of the economic downturn, it may not be possible to maintain current effort and honor all the priorities above without significant cuts. While maintenance of effort rarely feels like something to celebrate, we believe given the challenges facing the Commonwealth, we could be lucky to end up there. Nevertheless, we charge the Superintendent to inspect the budget carefully for areas that may yield us enough savings to move forward with the above priorities, including reductions from our 2008/2009 budget from new approaches to achieving our educational goals (assuming there is sufficient evidence that a new program is both more effective in achieving our strategic goals and less costly than the one for which it is substituted).

In addressing these priorities, the budget should also maintain longstanding commitments of the PSB to public education services and to sound financial planning. These include:

- ensuring adequate contingency funds for regular and special education growth and for unforeseen circumstances;
- adhering to system policies regarding the breakeven of revolving funds;
- adjusting budgets for curriculum materials, technology, professional development, general supplies and equipment to meet the needs of our teachers and school leaders;
- continuing the long standing commitment to our voters embodied in the Overrides to apportion the funds allocated to the PSB to expenditures such as textbooks, materials needed for instruction, technology and computer support, building maintenance and repair; and
- Sustaining the current building maintenance budget. (Brookline's vigorously protected maintenance budget over many difficult budget years impressed the School Building Authority and helped secure SBA funding for the Runkle School's coming renovation and expansion.)