

**BROOKLINE SCHOOL COMMITTEE
BUDGET GUIDELINES AND PRIORITIES
FY 2012**

INTRODUCTION

The Brookline School Committee provides guidance to the Superintendent and his staff as they create the annual operating budget for the Public Schools of Brookline (PSB). Ultimately, the Brookline School Committee is responsible for this budget. Our priorities each year are informed by the long term goals and objectives of “The Strategic Plan of the Public Schools of Brookline: 2009-2014.” Our goal is to create a multi-year, sustainable budgetary platform to carry on the work of the PSB and its traditions of educational excellence, innovation and improvement. With these budget guidelines and priorities, we challenge our community, the PSB administration and staff, and ourselves to move toward achieving a vision of educational excellence with equity for all students in Brookline.

Fiscal year 2012 is the third year of the national “down” economy, and we continue to be challenged by ongoing pressures of past cuts and future depressed conditions. In FY2010 significant budget challenges included a significant reduction in circuit breaker funding and higher than estimated out-of-district special education placements. A structural gap in that year of \$1 million was closed by a combination of spending reductions, utilization of one-time school reserves and a reserve fund transfer of approximately \$500,000 from the Town.

The current FY2011 thus far has seen stable expenditures in special education but has continued to see operating costs rise due to increased enrollment. Unpredictable areas such as special education private placements and salary replacement costs due to maternity/paternity leaves are the primary risks to improving financial stability in FY2011. We must account for the funding “cliff” created by the ending of federal funds available to schools from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009.

With the end of approximately one million dollars of ARRA funds, the Committee further expects that in FY2012, and for the foreseeable future, the extent of the available financial resources from federal, state, and municipal government will challenge the PSB’s ability to meet our vision. Above and beyond the lost funding, the anticipated growth in Town revenues falls short of the rise in the cost of current programming and services. A guiding principle of budgeting and these priorities, therefore, is to sustain progress on our major goals without exposing the PSB to abrupt changes.

Cost pressures on the FY2012 budget are concentrated in special education, enrollment growth, already negotiated collective bargaining increases, and rising healthcare costs for PSB employees. In addition, while the PSB recognizes and embraces its obligations to implement state mandates in areas such as bullying prevention and professional development for teachers of English Language Learners, we note that these mandates have multiplied and come without adequate funding, putting further pressure on both school programming and our operating budget.

We commend the administration for balancing several revolving funds accounts. In addition, we acknowledge with gratitude the engagement of our many Town and non-profit partners in education who contribute much, especially to our teachers' professional development and to our ability to continue innovating even in hard times. We are grateful for Brookline employees' participation in the Group Insurance Commission. While that change significantly lowered the base cost of health insurance, the continued pressure on health insurance costs will likely cause this line item to rise significantly in this and future years as premiums continue to increase.

Even with these positive developments, the FY 2012 budget will be challenging. The certainty of financial constraint and significant losses of funding from prior years, mixed with the equal certainty that the Town has limited avenues for local revenue enhancement in the current fiscal climate, make us cautious about the near term. We continue to rely on the energy and caliber of our teachers and staff and the commitment to our public schools by Town staff and officials to achieve what Brookline has come to expect of its schools. We greatly value constructive input from staff and community members to the budget process to assist us in meeting the fiscal challenges ahead, and we are confident that everyone in the PSB community will continue to think creatively and collaboratively about ways to innovate, to find efficiencies, and to sustain our commitment to our core values. Constructive input places the benefits of our entire system over a focus on special interests.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR COMMITTED BUDGET RESOURCES

The Committee places the greatest emphasis in the FY2012 budget on protecting the following strategic priorities, as listed in no particular order. These areas have been determined by the Committee to be critical to our mission of educational excellence during this upcoming year.

- **Investing in Program Innovation & Improvement.** In spite of fiscal constraints, the PSB must continue to devote resources to innovation, programmatic enhancements, and systemic improvements in quality and efficiency. We commend the Superintendent and his staff on implementation of the Brookline Public School's Annual Report Card [Strategy 4.1-4.1] and Program Review [Strategy 4.6], as examples of initiatives that benefit the entire school system in a myriad of ways: providing a channel for teachers and program coordinators to assess curriculum and pedagogy and guide improvements in their classrooms, giving voice to parents and others in the community to identify areas of strength and weakness, and giving the School Committee a sound, data-driven tool with which to assess progress in helping students to achieve. Although inevitably modest in FY2012, continued funding should be allocated for specific program and systemic quality improvements to advance Brookline education and for the staff resources necessary to compile, analyze and present data to inform decisions consistent with the Committee's commitment to improving the quality of education for all students. The Committee looks forward to hearing specific proposals from the Superintendent which support Strategic Plan goals, meet requirements for regulatory compliance, such as bullying prevention, or address an overall improvement in freeing up sustainable resources for educational programs, such as increasing use of electronic communication and registration.

- **21st Century Skills: World Language & Technology.** The K-6 World Language Program [Strategy 3.4], funded by the Brookline community with its support of the 2008 Override, is entering its second year of implementation. This program is critical to preparing our children to thrive in a complex global society, a top priority of the School Committee. We acknowledge the positive reviews from the community about the value of this program, commit ourselves to its continuation, and look forward to hearing more about its impact as implementation continues.

The Committee recognizes the efforts of the administration to improve technology use in pedagogy and professional development around technology, and urges the administration to focus on technology as an area for program improvements that may yield efficiencies, eventual cost savings, and improved convenience for parents, staff, and students. The Committee is mindful that technology use can be challenging for some families and encourages the Superintendent and staff to consider this as the PSB work to become “greener” and more efficient.

- **Resources for Early Grades to Offset Higher Class Size.** Maintaining a student/teacher ratio that is optimal for learning and hiring qualified and experienced teachers are strategic priorities [Strategies 1.1,1.5,2.3,4.5]. School system net enrollment increase of 766 children over the past six years has created significant operational budget pressures. Educating these children requires increased staffing in regular as well as special curricular classrooms (e.g. art, language, athletics) and includes costs of salary, benefits (plus anticipated post-employment benefits), orientation, mentoring, and professional development. Because of our commitment to neighborhood schools, only small adjustments in class assignments are possible, meaning that class size cannot be simply manipulated to minimize staffing. Research shows that even incremental increases in class size affect student learning and that the effects of large class numbers are more significant at the lower grades. We believe, therefore, that staff resources should be prioritized for hires in preK-3 to keep the teacher/student ratios as low as possible.
- **Achievement Gap & Transition Years.** The Committee continues to be fully committed to the strategic goal of eliminating structural gaps in student achievement; a goal which we recognize will continue to require resources. We note that both risk and opportunity are most pronounced during developmental transitions, specifically the preschool and middle school years and encourage the schools to focus continued attention on efforts to bring students successfully through these critical periods. Ensuring that all high-risk children are enrolled in quality pre-kindergarten optimizes achievement across the early transition years. Appropriate curriculum and targeted interventions for our youngest students will permit, in our view, the most progress in closing the academic achievement gap [Strategy 1.6] and lowering future special education costs. The other major developmental transition in public education is associated with the identification of previously unidentified high-risk students in the transition between middle and high school. [Strategy 1.7]. The Committee supports continued attention and resources to successful academic achievement during these transition phases.

- **Maintain funding for Special Education Reorganization.** The Committee strongly supports the Superintendent's efforts to improve the delivery of special education services to Brookline students using school-based and classroom supports [Strategies 1.4 and 2.4]. In-district specialized programs for identified cohorts of children in need, such as the expansion of Winthrop House to include ninth grade and the Landmark School collaboration [Strategies 1.3 and 2.4], allow Brookline children to be educated in Brookline closer to community and family supports that are frequently the most humane and cost efficient supplements to school. The Committee looks forward to hearing the results yielded by these innovations on student achievement, parent satisfaction, and special education budgetary trends. Given that this substantial portion of the budget continues to rise because of programmatic needs, the Committee requests that the Superintendent begin to assess how to create additional fiscal capacity to support these programs.
- **Minimize Reliance on One-Time and Short-Term Grant Funds.** Use of one-time funds for ongoing operational costs is never a good budgeting strategy, but we recognize that it has been essential in the past several years to prevent reductions. This includes the past expenditure of ARRA funds, the disappearance of which will leave us with at least a \$1million operating deficit in FY2012. Given the depletion of reserve accounts expected over the next three fiscal years to offset ARRA and other losses, it is critical to plan adequately for unforeseen cost escalations by a) protecting or replenishing reserve accounts when possible, and b) balance reductions with use of one-time funds so that the PSB is no longer dependent on one-time funds for ongoing operations by FY2015.

The Committee urges that the same caution should be applied in our approach to grant funds for new curricular programs or staffing, given the limited likelihood that sustainable funding for new programming introduced with grant funds will be available in the next several years.

- **Contingency Funds Should Emphasize Reserve Account Stability.** Given the depletion of reserve accounts expected over the next three fiscal years without revenue sources to replenish these reserves, it is critical to plan adequately for likely cost escalations, especially in historically volatile areas, such as special education and enrollment-driven programming. The Committee, therefore, requests the Superintendent to budget contingency funds in FY2012 with these two volatile areas in mind, and to begin development of a multi-year contingency plan appropriate to the total budget and volatility trend.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

1.) These priorities aim to guide development of a maintenance-of-effort budget. Unfortunately, to provide educational services at that level with the resources available will require the entire system to bear some budget reductions. In determining areas for cuts, the Superintendent should identify budget areas and/or programs where the PSB could provide services more effectively or more efficiently, areas where additional effort may yield long-term desired results and efficiencies, and areas that should not be maintained, if any, in order to meet the charge of a maintenance of effort budget.

Maintenance of effort does not mean maintain the status quo. It requires dynamism to manage a complex system that strives to deliver the best education possible with our existing resources. The Committee commends the Superintendent and his staff on successful leadership and management of change in the Public Schools of Brookline that benefits all students and occurs within the constraints of the budget. There have been successful program eliminations and modifications, more effective ways of delivering the same and better value, improved utilization of resources, and the introduction of new and expanded curriculum. We recognize that given the current economic environment, the difficulty to continue on this path has steepened precipitously.

2.) The Committee encourages the Superintendent to discuss with us the most challenging decisions as he prepares the FY2012 PSB budget, which the Committee recognizes will demand difficult choices. Clarity regarding the program impacts of any reductions will assist the Committee in its deliberations.

3.) Assessment of effectiveness, such as ongoing program review, is essential to successful budgeting. While we recognize that responsible innovation will sometimes yield disappointments, we strongly encourage the Superintendent and his staff to continue their work to measure the effectiveness of all the programs and initiatives in the system, so that this data can further support our budget process, guide difficult decision making regarding resource allocation, and serve our students well.

4.) The Committee would like to see a budget proposal that includes a plan balancing reductions with expenditures of one-time funds so that the Public Schools of Brookline are not dependent on one-time funds for ongoing operations by FY2015, protecting against abrupt discontinuation of services now and in the future.

5.) The Committee would like the Superintendent to consider expanding the use of digital (i.e. online) media and educational technology, both for system wide communication efforts as well as for pedagogical use, if and when deemed an effective investment or enhancement. We believe appropriate use of technology may allow the PSB to be more environmentally friendly, improve efficiency, create savings, and improve communication among parents, staff, and students.

The Brookline School Committee looks forward to working with the Administration, staff, and community to implement successfully the budget resources of FY2012 for the good of all students, their families and our community.

Submitted by the Brookline School Committee as voted on January 6, 2011.

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