



**Town of Concord**  
**Finance Committee and CPS Committee**  
**Meeting Minutes – February 15, 2023**

**Present:** Peggy Briggs (Chair); John Garofalo; Parashar Patel; Christine Reynolds; Lyndsey Lis; Dee Ortner; Kathy Cuocolo; Don Kupka; Lois Wasoff attended via Zoom.

**Absent:** Ray Andrews, Greg Guarriello, Brian Taylor, Suresh Bhatia, Eric Dahlberg, Amrith Kumar

**Others Present:** This was a joint meeting between the Finance Committee and the Concord Public School Committee. Please consider the School Committee minutes along with these Finance Committee minutes.

**Open Meeting:** Ms. Briggs called the meeting to order at 4:00 pm. The meeting was in a hybrid format, at the Ripley School and on Zoom.

**School Committee Presentation.** The Chairs reviewed the meeting objective, which was to revisit the continuing gap of over \$700k between the current Concord Public Schools (“CPS”) budget and the Finance Committee’s FY ‘24 CPS budget guideline. In addition, the School Committee sought to clarify some comments regarding Concord Carlisle Regional High School (“CCRHS”) performance metrics as discussed at an earlier Finance Committee meeting. The Finance Committee Guidelines Chair, Parashar Patel, noted a desire to clarify the future rate of CPS cost growth and cost offsets.

Dr. Laurie Hunter, School Superintendent, provided a detailed presentation, attached. [Concord Finance Concord School Committee February 15, 2023 - YouTube](#)

First there was a discussion of CCRHS’ performance and a data problem believed to negatively impact CCRHS’s ranking as published by Boston Magazine. The latest ranking showed CCRHS as 31<sup>st</sup> among State high schools, based on 72% of students going on to college – the actual college attendance is 91%. Historically, CCRHS has been ranked among the top 10 State school districts; the Superintendent is working to have the ranking revised.

The Superintendent covered the schools’ response to the decline in students’ mental health resulting from the pandemic as well as the recent announcement that homeless families will be housed at a local hotel. She discussed the results of school satisfaction surveys and student mental health surveys and responded to several questions.

Turning to the CPS budget, Dr. Hunter covered the growth of Special Education services provided within district, the growth in associated staff and the increase in the number of students with acute needs. She noted that the 7.5 FTE headcount growth in the FY’24 budget is related to Special Education services. The Superintendent responded to questions from the Finance Committee about the programs and related costs.

Dr. Hunter also covered metrics regarding per pupil spending, average teacher salaries, student teacher ratios, and average class size as compared to local districts. She also reviewed the latest district enrollment projections showing a downward trend which tapers off in the future. A discussion of the metrics ensued.

Next there was a review of CPS' operating cost growth and offsets (state funding/grants) including the use of ARPA and ESSR funds. It was noted in FY23 CPS added unbudgeted staff funded by ESSR grant funds, which were now rolling into the FY 24 operating budget request.

The Superintendent stated that the 4.7% requested CPS budget increase represented a level service budget and that the percentage increase was not without historical precedent looking back to FY13-15. She also noted that 80% of CPS' budget is tied to contractual salary increases and therefore has little room for reductions. Mr. Parashar Patel, noted that without context, historical comparisons of budget increases are less meaningful. The CPS School committee chair commented that the 4.7% increase was what was needed to maintain the strong results due to the increased mental health needs of the students.

Lastly, the Superintendent reviewed possible steps to close the budget gap. These steps were described as student facing but as far from core curriculum as possible and included reductions in transportation, field trips, and the instrumental music program. The list was intended to demonstrate the difficulty in reducing the budget further and the actions were not recommended by the Superintendent, nor had they been reviewed by the School Committee.

Finance Committee members commented on the budget presentation thanking the Superintendent and the School committee for the information and the dialog. In addition, comments included the difficulty of balancing the growing school and town budgets with affordable property tax growth, the need for Finance Committee, the School Committee and the Select Board to work together to address this structural issue, the need to identify efficiencies as well as other revenue sources (e.g. school fees, fund raising, increased commercial base, etc.) to fund cost growth, and the need to address deferred town capital and operating needs.

The session was well attended and there were many public comments which focused on two primary issues. Commenters expressed concern about any cuts in elementary musical instrument education and provided examples of how it benefited them or their children. Others expressed concern about reducing the budget which some felt was a town responsibility, noting the budget had already been cut to the bone, the need to support teachers' salaries, and that the guidelines should be increased to meet the CPS budget.

School committee members commented that the possible reductions were not good for the community and that the community expects the level of service assumed in the proposed budget. Parashar Patel reiterated that the structural budget issues need to be examined and requested that updated five year CPS financial projections be provided so the public is informed as to expected cost growth.

**Next Steps.** The FinCom will hold a public hearing on the School Committee articles on March 9 at 7pm in the Town House Hearing Room.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 7:00 pm.