CITY OF NORWALK
BOARD OF EDUCATION FINANCE AND
CITY FINANCE/CLAIMS COMMITTEE JOINT MEETING
JANUARY 22, 2025

ATTENDANCE: Board of Education: Sheri McCready-Pritchett, Chair
Kara Nelson Baekey
Diana Carpio

Finance/Claims: Greg Burnett, Chair
Jim Frayer
Johan Lopez
Anne Wennerstrand

OTHERS: Harry Rilling, Mayor; Jared Schmitt, City of Norwalk CFO; Lunda Asmani, BOE CFO; Dr. A. Estrella, Superintendent of Schools; Chitsamay Lam, Comptroller; Council Member H. Dunn; Rob Pennington, Assistant Superintendent.

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Burnett called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. A quorum was present.

ROLL CALL - COMMON COUNCIL AND BOE FINANCE CHAIRPERSONS

Mayor Rilling greeted everyone and said it was good that people had come out on such a cold evening. He said that this process had been underway for several months. The goal is to provide as many services as possibly while keeping taxes as low as possible.

Dr. Estrella said that they were happy to have everyone come out on such a cold evening. Everyone should keep in mind that the BOE members and staff are focused on the students. Thinking about the work ahead, she noted the importance of maintaining strong and effective programs across the District to ensure that the students thrive and succeed. Cities are successful when their schools provide adequate resources for the students to succeed.

Council Member Burnett then read the following statement:

> The joint meeting tonight is one of several opportunities to share information and to continue to dialog so both committees can better understand the Operating Budget goals, objectives, key drivers and challenges for the upcoming 2025/2026 Fiscal Year Budget cycle. It is essential that the committees understand the priority items as we move forward towards the creation of one City of Norwalk Operating Budget.
> Please mark your calendars for Thursday, February 13th, when the Common Council Finance and Claims Committee will host a public hearing beginning at 6:30 p.m. on the

Operating Budget recommendation. The Board of Estimate and Taxation will also hold a Public Hearing on Wednesday, March 26th, on the tentative Operating Budget.

The Public Hearing on the Capital Budget will take place on Thursday, February 6th, hosted by the Planning and Zoning Commission. So again, there will be several opportunities for additional public input as we continue in the budget cycle for both the Operating and Capital budgets.

This evening, we will focus on the Operating Budget during the joint meeting. The Board of Education has approved their budget requests and we will hear more this evening related to the key issues impacting the Operating Budget requests. We will also receive information from the City covering the financial overview and budget outlook.

Over the course of the next few weeks all of the budget input from the City departments as well as the Board of Education will be assessed, leading up to Monday, February 10th, when the recommended Operating Budget will be presented by the Chief Financial Officer, Jared Schmitt. Our goal is to remain steadfast in ensuring the strong financial posture of the City and minimizing the tax burden on households and we truly appreciate your input as we progress through this process.

At this time, I will turn it over to Sheri McCready-Pritchett for comments from the Board of Education Finance Committee.

Ms. McCready-Pritchett thanked Mr. Burnett and made the following statement:

Good evening, everyone. The purpose of this meeting is to continue the discussion around the FY 25/26 Budget. On January 14th, the Norwalk Board of Education approved the Superintendent's Recommended Budget for an increase of 9.7%. At the same time, let me be clear that the City has not made any determinations about the budget as of yet.

Norwalk Public Schools has made steady progress over the last five years and that success stems from the Board's commitment and mission to provide an excellent and equitable education so that all of Norwalk students will graduate Future Ready.

The development of the budget for the FY 25/26 budget was grounded in a strategic plan and that progress we have seen is the result of deliberate investment and resources that meet the needs of our students. At the same time, sustaining and building on this success requires continued support and commitment. Moreover, the requested budget addresses contractual obligations including employee compensation and benefits, rising costs for special education services, out of District tuition, transportation and utilities and the need to return key programs to the local budget. This budget represents a balanced approach at maintaining the high quality education and support services that our students, staff and family rely on.

I also want to make it known that relative to the communication that was emailed to parents, it is my understanding that that message was intended to encourage parents to advocate for the necessary funding that we believe is essential to our students and that a reduction in that request would have potential consequences. It was not suggesting that the Council was cutting the budget. Thank you very much and I look forward to our discussion.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Mr. Burnett then said that they would move to public participation and outlined the rules for the three minute public speaking portion.

Mr. Jon Richichi of Redwood Road came forward and greeted the Committees. He said that he was the parent of two Wolfpit students. He was deeply concerned about how the budget cuts could affect the students. Staffing cuts will impact the children. His children thrive when they are seen, supported and encouraged. Larger class sizes will result in less attention to the individual students. His children were excited when their teachers took the time to understand their unique learning needs. With fewer resources, the opportunity for connecting will diminish. Sharing staff, nurses coaches, counselors and assistant teachers removes the safety that the students need. A shared nurse may not be available during a medical emergency. Currently, students are experiencing record high stress and anxiety. Shared counselors will not have the capacity to support these children. Without the academic coaches, they will not be able to foster strong skills in reading and math.

Balancing finances and budgets is complex and difficult decisions must be made. He urged the Committees to consider the long term cost of these cuts on vital programs and extracurricular activities. The education of the children is not just an expense, it is the investment in the future of the community. This will short change the children and the generations to come. Think of the faces behind the numbers. It will be important to work together to provide them with the resources they need. Thank you for your time.

The next speaker was Ms. Amanda Trimboli of Cider Lane. She came forward and greeted the Committees. Regarding the Operational Budget, the 9.7% request was a large ask from the BOE. As a taxpayer, she cringed, but as a parent in this District, she realized what was at stake if the budget wasn't approved. She encouraged the Council to approve as much as they possibly could in order to retain the important instructors and programs. The class sizes are at maximum and there is no way that assistant principals and nurses can be shared across schools. She listed a number of integral staff members that keep the school functioning. Currently, the special needs population makes up 2/3rds of the student population and is growing.

Ms. Trimboli stated that she was a substitute teacher in her children's schools and sees the day to day interactions and understands why the needs are non-negotiable. She asked how the City planned to fund the BOE without raising taxes and whether they had considered working closely with the BOE on solutions. She also wished to know if the City had considered dipping into the Rainy Day Fund and noted that she had discovered that there was $86 million balance in the fund. 20% of that could solve the BOE's budgetary issues. All the money in that fund is from taxpayers.

There are some hard decisions that have to be made and it is time to listen to the taxpayers' concerns. The Administration and the BOE need to work together to come up with solutions for these issues presented by the taxpayers and the parents. The education of the students should not be in the crossfire of the decision making process. The Council Members and BOE members were voted into their position by their constituents to work in the best interest of the community. The next election will be an important one. Ms. Trimboli then thanked both the committee members for listening.

Ms. Mary Yordon of 9 Mott Avenue, came forward and greeted the committees. She stated that she was present on behalf of the Norwalk Federation of Teachers (NFT). While the budget decisions are still in process, the Norwalk Public Schools (NPS) communications about potential budget cuts for school nurses, music counselors, middle schools sports and other critical areas have caused great concern among members.

The NFT believes a more balanced approach is possible. This would include school based budgets, minimizing Central Office costs and protecting students and employees from unnecessary hardships. The union identified $1 million dollars in cuts that could be considered luxuries in other Districts including School Quality Review, private consultants, catered meetings, the expansion of International Baccalaureate programs in Montessori, Central Office departments reduced such as Human Resources and Communications. Ms. Yordon then listed other items, such as travel, convocations, and branded cash gift card programs. Reallocating these funds could spare additional positions like the counselors, nurses and assistant principals. Ms. Yordon said that she appreciates the ongoing support that the City has provided for the schools.

Mr. Joseph Giandurco, the Norwalk Federation of Teacher's Vice President, came forward and greeted the Committees. He said that the NFT appreciates the ongoing efforts to support education in Norwalk and the openness to feedback. He said that the NFT would be emphasizing the school budget, minimizing Central Office costs and protecting students and employees from unnecessary hardships.

He proceeded to question the following issues: the International Baccalaureate and its associated costs and expressed concerns about the BMHS diploma program expansion.

There were also concerns about food and NPS meeting expenses. Thirdly, the School Quality Lead earns over $200,000 along with costs of preparation time for NPS staff. The union members feel this is a distraction and disruption to their day. Fourth, in 2018 the Communications Department was managed by one person. Now the department had grown along with the salaries. Travel costs have increased from $122,000 in 2018 to $355,000. The

Convocation had a number of additional expenses because of the outdoor setting. There was an additional security officer position recently posted with a salary of $142,450. HR specialists remain at 9 even as benefit specialists have been moved out of the department.

Mr. Giandurco asked how much was being spent on consultants for Equity, Montessori and MLL programs along with retreats. While the District should continue with the Montessori classrooms that they have already invested in, expansion should be re-considered.

Mr. Giandurco said that these comments were not criticisms of the staff in these positions, but simply should be a reconsideration of the spending in these areas. He urged a focus on protecting students and front line staff and avoiding larger class sizes and preserving roles like parent coordinators, assistant principals and others who directly impact the students and their families. He thanked the Committees for their time.

Ms. Lisa Brinton, of Shorefront Park, greeted the Committees and stated that she was the Independent Party Town Chair. She stated that two of her children had graduated from NPS and was a 20 year alumnus to the Budget fights.

She said that it was time for the Mayor and Superintendent to be honest with the taxpayers about the school budget and mentioned a scare tactic of having parents write to the Council about the school budget. The Common Council does not control line items in the BOE budget. Education is one line item and the final amount is determined by the BET.

Ms. Brinton said Norwalk's inability to keep up with the BOE spending was due to a number of factors. The BOE was asking for a 10% increase when the enrollment had declined by over 100 students and was forecasted to drop by another 300 in the fall.

Ms. Brinton suggested that the Mayor and the Superintendent write to the Governor in Hartford to address the disproportionate impact that immigration has had on Norwalk's schools. Norwalk's percentage of MLL students is approaching 25% while the State has 10%. She also suggested that Dr. Estrella direct parents to write to the Planning and Zoning Commission requesting a stop to the years of State driven property tax abatements for the Mall and the apartments. These all deny the City needed revenue for the schools. She also mentioned that there were illegal multi-family houses where the landlords cheat the tax rolls.

Ms. Brinton reminded the Committees of the five year phase in that was needed to solve the jump in the 2023 reval due to the drop in commercial properties and shifted the burden to the residential property owners. She then reviewed the details of when she and Mr. Barbis warned about the budget when Dr. Estrella first started in Norwalk but these warnings were ignored.

Ms. Britton said that during the time she was involved with the BOE, she and others had worked to raise math and reading scores, but was now seeing these scored decline. The BOE has a lot more work to do. She thanked the Board for their time.

Mr. Will Hennessy of Pheasant Lane was the next speaker. He greeted the Committees and said that he was the parent of a student at Wolfpit. He said that his daughter has a severe nut allergy and earlier in the day, they received a phone call from the school nurse because his daughter's teacher noticed that there was a hive on his daughter's forehead. The school nurse was able to ascertain that it was a reaction to a mild cold and applied some ointment on it. With a larger class size, the teacher might not have noticed his daughter's hive and if the nurse wasn't there, he or his wife would have been called to pick her up. If it had actually been an anaphylaxis reaction, it would have been very serious. When talking about saving money, having a liability because there was a child with a nut allergy, which is one of the least concerns for a District with students who have serious medical issues, would be immense. He thanked the Board for their time.

The next speaker was Ms. Amanda Frasier of Naples Street. She said she has a student at Kendall College and Career Academy. She spoke about the potential cuts to the programs. Larger classes make the teachers spend more on class management rather than the quality of education. The students deserve better than that or to be lost in a crowd. The assistant principals are the backbones of the schools and supply support to both staff and students. Having to split their time between buildings will severely diminish that. The schools need strong leadership to thrive.

Ms. Frasier said that she was concerned about having the school nurses split between schools. They are essential to the health and wellbeing of the students. Sharing the school nurses may mean that students don't receive the timely medical attention when they need it the most. This is about safe guarding the health and safety of the students. Ms. Frasier added that she works for a health non-profit and is aware of how important it is for prompt medical attention during emergencies where minutes could mean the difference between life and death outcomes.

By approving the proposed school budget or as much of it as possible, the challenges can be met head on. Smaller class sizes, dedicated assistant principals and full time school nurses are an investment in the children's future. The children are counting on us. She thanked the Board for their time.

The next person to speak was Ms. Lisa Williams of Midrocks Drive. She greeted the Committees and said her daughter attends Wolfpit and her son is in the pre-school at NECC.

Regarding the Capital Budget, Ms. Williams said she had been impressed with the hardworking Wolfpit staff who go above and beyond. The building has been in need of upgrading for some time and in particular, the lack of air conditioning. There have been days when the school has had to close early or close completely due to uncomfortable conditions. This has a negative effect on both the students and staff. She requested that the Committees support asbestos abatement and the installation of a proper HVAC system for a safe and comfortable learning environment.

Regarding the Operational Budget, she said that raising taxes was not an easy decision, but the cuts would impact the students. The rising cost of Special Education and the grants phasing out this year, specialized needs, transportation cost increases along with food service increases and a rising student population from new apartment complexes has put a strain on the instructional coaches and on the budget. Cutting the assistant principals, nursing staff and instructional coaches would create chaos in the schools and educational gaps for the students. She urged the Committees to fund the proposed budget as much as possible. Keep the children moving in the right direction to succeed. She thanked the Board for their time.

Council Member Dunn joined the meeting at 6:33 p.m.

The next person to speak was Ms. Andrea Degeatano of Murray Street came forward and greeted the Committees. She said she had comments about both the NPS Capital and Operational budgets. Her two children attend Wolfpit.

Regarding the Capital budget, Ms. Degeatano said the proposed improvement for Wolfpit are absolutely essential to ensuring a functioning facility for the students and staff. The classrooms are unbearable when the weather gets warmer. Having to close the building early or completely because of the weather is unacceptable. Asbestos abatement and the installation of a proper HVAC system is necessary to give the building a much needed dose of life support until this building is replaced.

Regarding the Operational budget, a 9.7% increase makes Ms. Degeatano angry as a tax payer but the threats of the budget cuts if the increase is not approve makes her even angrier. She listed her concerns regarding cutting the assistant principals, nursing staff and instructional coaches along with paras and part time counselors none of which are not expendable. The high needs population continues to grow. She asked if the District would continue to shift these students to an out of District placement, which the taxpayers would be expected to pay for. Eliminating those positions that support these high need students would increase the number of outplacements.

Ms. Degeatano said that she recognized that the 9.7% budget increase was not likely to be approved, but urged the Committees to fund the budget as much as they could. Cutting these positions is not an option and the children need this. If these cuts happen, feet will be held to the proverbial fire. Please figure this out together because the taxpayers and voters intend on holding all of the officials accountable. Please don't let the children down. She thanked the Board for their time.

The next speaker was Ms. Lisa Henderson of Apple Tree Lane. She greeted the Committees and said she wished to thank Ms. Brinton for her accurate testimony. Ms. Henderson said that she had been in the same position before with the same scare tactics but a smaller increase percentage. A 9.7% ask from the BOE is unacceptable and unaffordable for the Norwalk taxpayers. Due to the phased in reassessment, the taxpayers are already facing an increase. As the parent of four NPS graduates, she said that the budget issues are not new problems. There were years of tightening the belt and this should be the same case now. Taxpayers are paying attention this election year. Please keep the taxes low. She thanked the Board for their time.

The next speaker was Ms. Diana Paladino Christopher of Naples Street. She said that she has three children, one of which is attending NECC, which will be closing in June due to space issues. She has a fifth grader at Marvin and a sixth grader at Ponus STEAM. She hopes that the proposed budget cuts are reconsidered because the students deserve the best. Cutting important positions like the nurses or the instructional coaches will create gaps in the quality of the students' education. There will be long term effects in having larger class sizes and students will not get the services that they need. The children are a future investment. Larger class sizes and fewer paras are deeply concerning because they impact the class room experience and the ability of educators to meet the students' needs. While no one wants to see taxes increase, they also don't want to see parents, students and teachers struggling. People are leaving Norwalk because the District cannot fulfill the educational needs. She urged people to prioritize to find a way to maintain the resources necessary while coming as close as possible to fulfill the needs of the students. She thanked the Board for their time.

Mr. Burnett thanked everyone for taking their time to address the Committees. The Council has received several emails that they have reviewed. The Committees appreciate the input. He announced that the next presentation would be from Mr. Schmitt, the City's CFO, followed by Mr. Lunda Asmani, the BOE CFO.

CFO PRESENTATIONS

[36:29]

Mr. Schmitt greeted the Committees and displayed a PowerPoint presentation on screen. He noted that the City was due to present the budget within the next few weeks. This is an overview and a backdrop. None of this is set in stone.

He then gave an overview of the economic situation including inflation, interest rates, housing market, stock market and the new Federal administration. He noted that national firms are announcing layoffs, and also listed a number of Connecticut firms that were also laying off workers. The Governor will be announcing the State budget in February.

Mr. Schmitt said that the City is required to produce an annual financial report titled the Annual Comprehensive Finance Report (ACFR) that runs from the start of the fiscal year on July 1st through June 30th. This report includes Long term liabilities, Pensions ADEC (required pension payments and OPEB), investment returns, Operating Cash investment earnings, the Fund Balance, APRA funds, and property tax revenue and the internal service fund.

He noted that the City had seen some solid returns on investments, however, it is expected that these returns will taper off over the next year and a half. He also reviewed the details of the requirements for the use of APRA funding.

The FYE 2026 Budget Challenges were the next items covered. This included the real estate revaluation phase-in, the State mandated changes affecting the motor vehicles tax revenue, the proposed 9.7% BOE budget request which is $22.6 million; unresolved bargaining agreements; pension benefits. Mr. Schmitt reviewed the details of each of these items.

The State mandated adjustments for motor vehicles, which lowers the mill rate on vehicles to the lowest real estate rate, will result in approximately $10 million dollars less in tax revenue. Secondly, the method for valuation of motor vehicles has been changed. Instead of being based on the blue book value, it will be based on the MSRP on the date that the vehicle was purchased and the rate will match depreciation of the vehicle over time. This will result in approximately $2 million loss in revenue for the City.

Mr. Schmitt said that he appreciated having the preview of the BOE budget and the fact that he was able to submit questions in advance was also helpful. He reminded everyone that this was his first time dealing with the budget cycle.

Six bargaining agreements expired in July, which is creating some uncertainty in forecasting the budget figures. Funds are being set aside for the potential settlements. Other towns are seeing settlements of 2.5% to 3.0% increases.

He then gave an overview of the City's contributions to the various pension funds. The City's pension payments will increase. Going forward, Mr. Schmitt expects that they will not see such large increases because the City will have caught up on the payments.

The last slide addressed potential Budget Reduction Measures and included: a reduction in OPEB ADEC will offset the increased pension costs; controlling the spending increases to between 2.0% -2.5% for FYE 2026; identifying opportunities to reduce spending, and continuing to provide essential municipal services at the lowest possible cost.

BOE CFO PRESENTATION

[56:00]

Mr. Asmani greeted the Committee members, and everyone else that was present. He then narrated the FY26 BOE Tentative Approved Budget PowerPoint slide deck.

The first topic discussed was he current school enrollment bar chart and one with the City's population. The District has a relatively steady enrollment. He noted that the number of specialized learners and high needs population which has increased by 29% since 2019. During the same period, the City only experienced a 4% growth. Comparing these two percentages is not representative of the accurate situation.

The next slide illustrated the MLL and SPED trends, both of which were increasing, but the MLL category was increasing at a greater rate. The Specialized Learning population was also represented and this population has experienced a steady rate of growth.

Mr. Asmani then gave a brief overview of the staffing distributions and reviewed the key drivers in this category. There are over 1,700 positions in the District, the majority of the staff are located in the Elementary schools. 97% of the staff work directly with the students, whether located directly in the schools or Central Office. This leaves only 3% of the staff without direct student contact. There are 87 positions that are grant funded, most of which are located in the schools.

The next slide listed the various grants that would be phased out this year and provided funding for specific programs such as counseling programs; K-3 literacy materials; Middle School Summer Programming; Future Ready program expansion, Mid Fairfield Middle School PSD Faith Act; Dual Credit Expansion, Drug and Alcohol Counselor, and the K-12 Districtwide Social Worker.

There have been 21 positions that have been identified for reduction and 7 new positions that have been created through reorganization. This will result in a reduction of 14 positions and a reduction of $2,168,856. An additional $1.0 million in additional reductions are being reviewed.

Mr. Asmani then reviewed some of the key drivers such as health insurance. He explained that the State plan calculates the cost based on the claims from the past 12 months in the counties. As of January 21st, the State is project that Fairfield County will have a renewal rate of 10-12% along with the base 1% for being in Fairfield County. The final percentage will be released in March. The Health Consultants have projected an overall increase of 14% with a projection of 15% next year. This works out to over $49 million dollars for the 2026 fiscal year. The Board pays 80% and the employees pay 20% of the costs.

Additional cost drivers are the contractual wages and the grant to local budget shift. Mr. Asmani gave the details of these two items and why they were included in the operating budget. There were also increases in the Specialized Needs category (+5%) and transportation costs (+7%). There is a shortage of transportation drivers nationally and the 7% increase does not include the bonuses that the bus companies are offering for new drivers. Those bonus increases will be passed along to the District.

The new South Norwalk School is coming online with a new third grade classroom. There will be increased costs and staffing expenses for this school. Food services are also experiencing cost increases.

The next slide was the FY 25-26 BOE General Fund Tentative figures and a pie chart of how the funds are spent. 74% are spent on salaries and benefits.

The next slide was a pie chart of an average elementary school budget. 77% was devoted to salaries, 20% to benefits and 3% to other expenses such as utilities. Mr. Asmani reviewed the breakout for staffing, class size and other categories.

Mr. Asmani concluded his presentation by saying there was a QR code that would take viewer to the 90 page budget book online and he displayed the table of contents on screen.

He thanked the Committee members for their time.

DISCUSSION
[1:22:50]

Council Member Lopez had a question about the consolidation of the 21 Central Office positions. He wished to know if that was part of the last joint meeting. Mr. Asmani said that those changes were more recent and not included in the previous presentation.

Council Member Frayer asked what the previous budget projections were as compared to the actual funds expended. Mr. Schmitt reviewed the figures for the City's previous projected budget and the actual expenditures. He explained it was still too early to speak about the revenues for this past financial years.

Mr. Asmani said that last year, the BOE's actual fund for 2024 was $26.5 million. Last year, there was only $60,000 that was rolled over into the new fiscal year. He reminded everyone that last year, when the budget was approved, they had not fully funded the special education account. Any unspent funds were rolled over into that account. He said that they expected the same for FY2025.

Council Member Frayer wished to know how much the City contributes to the BOE. Mr. Schmitt said that the City was required to report the amount of funding allocated to the BOE to the State every year. He said he believed it was between $25 and $30 million dollars, but could provide the Council will the exact figure. He reminded everyone that the City covers the debt service on any of the capital projects and is not included in the amount of funds allocated to the BOE.

Council Member Frayer asked Mr. Schmitt to speak about the Fund Balance and how the rating agencies view that account in terms of the bond ratings. Mr. Schmitt then spoke about the various factors that are used to determine whether it would be worthwhile to use some of the Fund Balance towards a project. He noted that the rating agencies are continuously citing the fact that the 20% Norwalk has is lower nationally. However, in Connecticut, the 20% fund balance is on the higher side. Discussion followed.

Mayor Rilling asked Mr. Schmitt to explain what would happen to the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) next year if they took the $22 million out of the Fund Balance account to cover the budget shortfall. Mr. Schmitt said that if the City withdraws funding from the Fund Balance or the Internal Service Fund, they are essentially kicking the can down the road. It is not a permanent solution and the costs will continue to be there. There needs to be some structural changes to address the shortfall. He added that there would have to be another re-evaluation and that point the hope is that the commercial properties will catch up with the residential property values.

Council Member Lopez asked for clarification on the differential between the commercial developments and residential properties. Mr. Schmitt said that the Tax Assessor was reviewing this currently and would be reporting to the Council at the end of the month. He went on to give some of the details. The large developments only represent a small fraction of the overall scheme of things in the Grand List.

Ms. McCready-Pritchett noted that the Fund Balance was approximately 20% of the City budget and 37% of the BOE budget. She then asked if the City would consider a realistic draw down over a period of time rather than at the end of the year. Mayor Rilling said that the administration was currently working on this.

Ms. McCready-Pritchett commented that there had been a lot of talk about the MLL students and she wished to make sure that everyone realizes that the District is required by law to educate every student who come to Norwalk, no matter where they are from or what language they speak.

Ms. Carpio said that the Board recognizes the community and welcomes diversity. She asked how the City plans to support the objective of educating every single child. Council Member Lopez replied that from his point of view, there is a challenge in Hartford to find a compromise between fiscal rules that were put into place in 2017 to stabilize the State finances but came at the expense of essential services. He said that he would be more than happy to work with any parent to help advocate and move the conversation forward to be supportive in a positive way. State funding is crucial to any school.

Mr. Burnett pointed out that the City allocates a set amount to the BOE. Specifically asking what the City is going to do to address the MLL population is not under the Council's control. It is the Board of Education's responsibility to allocate the funds. The Council cannot say to the Board that they will give the BOE a certain amount of money for MLL issues. Discussion followed.

Ms. Nelson Baekey asked how the City utilizes all the data that the Board generates to make the appropriation decisions on the Board's behalf. Mayor Rilling reminded everyone that this was an annual process and that each year, they look at the situation and make adjustments. Budgeting is not scientific but actually the best guess one can make. While there is a lot of development going on, the number of students has remained fairly constant.

Council Member Dunn said that the City's role was to work at having the most impact that they can for as many students as possible. Most of it is trying to be fiscally responsible.

Council Member Dunn pointed out that the student population had remained fairly consistent. She asked why there was an increase in the transportation costs. Mr. Asmani explained that the biggest driver was the contracts. Even without adding another bus, the cost will increase year after year. Right now the District is adding four additional buses due to programming within the schools.

Council Member Dunn asked for more details about the different buses, which Mr. Asmani reviewed with her.

Council Member Dunn wished to know why the class sizes were not decreasing since the District was adding more teachers. Dr. Estrella said that they have been bringing special education services in house, which requires more personnel. By having the students back in the District, they are reducing the out of district tuition costs, but still need to add staff to support the students along with para educational providers to deliver services. Mr. Pennington came forward and said that the enrollment figures do include out of district students. Discussion followed.

Ms. Nelson Baekey asked what the Council Members' process looked like for making decisions. Council Member Burnett said that the Council Members were still processing all the information that they have been given. Mr. Schmitt added that it was a combination of science and art, just like what the Mayor stated earlier. There are many factors involved in the decision process. He said that Council Member Lopez has already mentioned that many of the requirements and mandates were put in place by the State.

The discussion moved to Senate Bill #1. Ms. Nelson Baekey said that Norwalk was not the only municipality that was facing struggles with providing services for the students. Dr. Estrella agreed and spoke about the fact that she had been advocating for the State funding. Mayor Rilling said that they were constantly talking to their State delegation about this because Hartford looks at Norwalk as being on the Gold Coast. He spoke about how there was a meeting in New Haven for the top five cities, and Norwalk was not invited because Norwalk is the sixth largest city.

Ms. McCready-Pritchett asked how the City could assist the BOE in effectively communicating to the taxpayers the importance of education funding to insure taxpayer support. Council Member Frayer said that on the Council are all on the same team, but the Council has to be realistic about how much the City can realistically tax the property owners. The Council will advocate with the State for more money, but the Council cannot designate funding for particular BOE line items. Discussion followed.

Dr. Estrella suggested that perhaps they would like to consider having this meeting at a different time next year. It might make more sense to have the discussions when there is more clarity on the City side as to where the budget stands. Discussion followed.

Mayor Rilling explained that the BET meets with the individual departments and goes through the budget line by line and makes decisions based on that. When the Board comes in, the speakers advocate for certain items. He said that in the past years, the administration advocates for more money for the BOE than for any other department.

Council Member Lopez said that a number of speakers had brought up several non-essential items that they terms "luxury" items. He asked if the BOE would be taking a look at them. Mr.

Asmani said that in the budget book, there are 100 lines of object codes and when they look at reductions, they look at those first before cutting staff.

Dr. Estrella said that when she arrived, one of the key issues was communications and they have been working on that. 14 positions will be eliminated that the District needs, but they know they have to make concessions. For the past several years, the graduation rates have increased but that was not the case a few years ago. That will also impact whether people want to move to the city and property values.

Mayor Rilling said that this discussion doesn't end here, it is a constant ongoing discussion.

Council Member Dunn pointed out that if there was a 20% increase in taxes, many of the landlords would simply pass it on to the renters.

Dr. Estrella said that they had been working to bridge the gaps through the Family Center and Youth Services. Ms. Faioes and the team work to build efficiencies and the public often does not see this. They are working with City Department to accomplish things more efficiently. Mayor Rilling said that he has lunch with Dr. Estrella once a month and that she picks his pocket every time.

Council Member Burnett thanked everyone for their time and reminded everyone that this was not the last meeting. Discussions will continue.

ADJOURNMENT

[2:19]

**** COUNCIL MEMBER LOPEZ MOVED TO ADJOURN.**
**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**.

The meeting adjourned at 8:28 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services