

**COMMON COUNCIL
2022
NORWALK, CONNECTICUT
ZOOM/YOUTUBE**

**FEBRUARY 15,
VIA**

**ALL COMMON COUNCIL ACTIONS TAKEN AT THIS MEETING TO
APPROVE EXPENDITURES AND CONTRACTS OR TO ACCEPT BIDS AND
OTHER PROPOSALS REQUIRING THE EXPENDITURE OF CITY FUNDS
ARE SUBJECT TO THE AVAILABILITY OF FUNDS**

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**SPECIAL JOINT WORKSHOP OF THE
NORWALK COMMON COUNCIL / BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Special Joint Workshop of the
Norwalk Common Council/Board of Education
February 15, 2022
Via Zoom/YouTube
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I. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Livingston opened the Workshop at 5:34 p.m.

COMMON COUNCIL ATTENDANCE: Mayor Harry Rilling; Gregory Burnett; Dominique Johnson; Barbara Smyth; Nicol Ayers; David Heuvelman; Diana Revulus; Darlene Young; John Kydes; Jenn McMurrer; Heidi Alterman; Thomas Keegan; Thomas Livingston; Lisa Shanahan

BOARD OF EDUCATION ATTENDANCE: Godfrey Azima; Kara Baekey; Sheri Brown; Diana Carpio; Erica DePalma; Sherelle Harris; Colin Hosten; Janine Randolph

STAFF: Dr. Alexandra Estrella, Superintendent of Schools; Lunda Asmani, Chief Financial Officer

Mr. Livingston gave opening remarks and said everyone was here this evening because they care about Norwalk and all the residents, citizens and students. He reviewed the procedure for the workshop.

Mr. Hosten gave opening remarks and said they all share similar goals and said the process, that is dictated by the City Charter is an on going process. He added that there will be lots of opportunity for public feedback up to the point that the Common Council votes on the budget cap. He said that not everyone will agree, but tonight is an opportunity to ask questions.

Mayor Rilling gave opening remarks and said it is very important to communicate on a regular basis and everyone has the same goals in mind to try to craft a budget in a fair way. He thanked everyone for attending this evening.

II. DISCUSSION OF BOE 2022-2023 OPERATING BUDGET

Mr. Asmani shared his screen and walked everyone through the Superintendent's Board of Education 2022-2023 recommended operating budget. He described how the Board of Education created their budget and noted that it was a five-step process. He also reviewed the approval process.

Mr. Asmani said the 2021-22 approved Board of Education budget was \$208.5 million. The 2022-23 recommended budget is \$227.5 million which is a 9.1% increase over last year's approved budget. He reviewed the core services.

Mr. Asmani discussed the federal stimulus funds and said the City did a good job of allocating those funds. He reviewed the City side initiatives that includes flood mitigation, community services, economic development and high speed internet. On the

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public school side, those initiatives included summer school, Social Workers and intervention teachers.

Dr. Adam Reynolds, Principal, West Rocks Middle School described intervention initiatives that were taken at the school for math and reading. Mr. Asmani said that he understands this is an on going process and that moving forward, as they get the initial caps from the Common Council, they will allow the Board of Education to have discussions before setting the final cap.

Mr. Livingston opened the floor for questions.

Ms. McMurrer asked how many staff were funded by the ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds. Mr. Asmani said there were about 103 teachers funded by the grant money. Dr. Estrella said they put together a FAQ so everyone will have access to the information. She said that last year they had to reduce some things in order to fund the reading and math specialists.

Ms. Johnson asked what percentage was needed to meet the contractual obligations. Mr. Asmani said 4 ½% is based on last year's budget. In the next year, they will have to make a decision about what will happen. Ms. Johnson said that in looking at the Specialists, she sees the salaries are north of \$200,000 and asked if that includes benefits. Mr. Asmani said that he believed that the personnel costs include salary and benefits. Dr. Estrella said it depends on the individual and their years of service will determine where they fall in the pay scale. That number fluctuates.

Mr. Hosten said this question came up during Board discussions as well. He said the question was asked how the decision was made to assign the position to a grant. He added that most of the grant is funded through reimbursements. These positions fulfil the original intent of the grant. Dr. Estrella said the ESSER grant came with parameters as to how they can spend the money.

Mr. Livingston asked about the plan after the funds expire. Dr. Estrella said they made it clear to the staff that their position would be eliminated if it is not funded. She said the Interventionists should have been in the schools, pre covid. They created an analysis to look at what is needed to fulfill the needs that exist in the schools. She said they are asking for a \$9.1% increase in order to be on track.

Ms. Alterman said she heard a lot of comments about students underperforming in reading and math, but then found that the State accountability report showed they exceeded expectations. She asked about the difference pre and post covid. Dr. Estrella said they are doing very well. Norwalk is the best urban school district and has a very diverse student population.

Ms. Revolus said that Norwalk is compared to other cities such as, Ansonia, Danbury, Derby, East Hartford, Meriden and West Haven. She said that before this administration, Norwalk was in a trend where student population was increasing. She asked if they are paying attention to the trend of a declining student population. Dr. Estrella said the student population has increased and their focus has been to look at all the programs to be sure all the students are being served.

Mr. Burnett said that a reference was made about last year's reduction to the magnet school. He asked if those reductions took place. He also asked if there is a schedule of programs that have been sunset from last year or if there was a reassessment. He said he did not see any information showing any reductions. Dr. Estrella said the funding was repurposed. Mr. Burnett asked if the \$1.5 million planned reduction took place. Dr. Estrella said the funds were repurposed to address the specialist needs in the District.

Mr. Heuvelman asked about enrollment numbers. Dr. Estrella said they added students. Mr. Heuvelman said he read that the contractual obligation is 2.2% overall and the other is 1.4% which equals 3.6%. Mr. Heuvelman asked if there was a breakdown of ESSER expenditures that have to be covered. He said he did not see it in the document.

Mr. Asmani presented a breakdown of the ESSER funds. Mr. Heuvelman asked for a copy.

Ms. Ayers asked about redoing the increase for the Incubator since they do not know how long it will be before it is up and running. Dr. Estrella said there is no other way to incubate a school. She added that they built enough cushion room if there are any delays. She said they want to deliver quality and take into account the impact on the new South Norwalk school. They want to do that gradually, one grade at a time. To be efficient and beneficial to the students and families, they need to create the school gradually.

Ms. Ayers said that if they are trying to be good stewards and are in a resource crisis, why are they spending that during a resource crisis. She said they do not have unlimited resources. Ms. Ayers asked if they could take a second look at trimming the budget. Dr. Estrella said they continue to trim and realign resources so that it will not negatively impact students. Ms. Ayers asked how the proposed increase will be seen in the school based budget.

Mr. Asmani shared his screen showing budget drivers. Dr. Estrella said there are resources that are being funded centrally. Mr. Robert Pennington, Assistant Superintendent of Schools talked about Special Education services and covid initiatives.

Ms. Ayers asked how much is allocated to each school. Dr. Estrella said she can forward he slide with that information to the Common Council members.

Mr. Goldstein asked about how much of the current ESSER funds have been spent and if there is a plan once those funds run out. Dr. Estrella said they spent most of those funds to hire additional personnel so they could have the elementary students in the classroom. They also had to spend that funding for monitors to ensure social distancing, additional buses and for a lot of PPE and Hepa filters. They also used those funds to bring in personnel around social and emotional learning.

Dr. Estrella said this year, they are asking for funding so they can ensure they do not have to let go needed personnel. Mr. Goldstein said he was trying to figure out if there is a strategy to retain those employees who were hired under the ESSER grant so funding does not come from the municipality. Dr. Estrella said they made efforts to fund those positions through philanthropy. She said they are constantly looking for external dollars.

Ms. Shanahan asked if there is a sense of how much is being spent on instructional support. Dr. Estrella said she can provide that information.

Dr. Estrella talked about the central office staff and noted they are expected to provide services in the schools.

Ms. Smyth said she supports interventionist working with the children. She added that she hears complaints about a bloated central office staff. She noted that a lot of teachers live in Norwalk and are taxpayers and expressed concern with what they are seeing. She also asked about the School Quality Review team at the high school level. She said it is a burdensome process. Dr. Estrella said she wanted to focus on the budget.

Dr. Estrella said when she reorganized the central office, they kept the numbers the same, but now they are in the schools. The School Quality Review process is meant to provide support; this is instrumental because they have a diverse student population.

Ms. Niedzielski Eichner asked if the Common Council was closing in on sufficient funding. Mr. Azima said he did not know if that could be answered.

Ms. DePalma said the SRBI process is supposed to get in front of students with disabilities. What the Superintendent is doing now will save taxpayers in the future.

Mr. Hosten and Mr. Livingston made brief closing remarks and thanked members of the Board of Education and Common Council for having a meaningful conversation.

Dr. Estrella thanked the Board of Education staff for providing information.

III. ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. HEUVELMAN MOVED TO ADJOURN
** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

There was no further business, and the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 7:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosemarie Lombardi
Telesco Secretarial Services

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Telesco Secretarial Services