

## Spotlight on Education

Budget discussions are underway at the Board of Education. We encourage the community to attend a forum regarding the Education Budget which will be held Thursday, March 5, at 7 p.m. in the cafeteria at WMS. The Board of Selectmen and the Board of Finance have been invited as well. This is an important opportunity to voice your thoughts on our educational spending priorities. You may also contact us at [asktheboard@woodstockschoools.net](mailto:asktheboard@woodstockschoools.net).

Below we respond to some of the community's frequently asked questions about the Education budget. You can receive more detail on these questions as well as any others you may have by calling the Superintendent, Dr. Baran, at 928-7453. Per pupil comparative cost data are from the State's website: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?A=2635&Q=322152> (Latest data available 2006-07.) This is the first in a series of topics we plan to address. You can also find these posted on the schools' website at [www.woodstockschoools.net](http://www.woodstockschoools.net).

Field Code Changed

**Q** What has been the rate of growth in Woodstock's education budget over time?

**A** Over the past five years, Woodstock's total education budget has increased at a compound annual rate of growth of 5%, to \$15,475,800 for this fiscal year 2008-09. This includes all regular education costs K-8, all high school regular education costs, and all special education costs K-12. Of these categories, the greatest driver of costs has been special education (PreK- 8) which has increased at an average annual rate of 8.4%. All high school costs (including special education) have increased at an average rate of 5.2%. All PreK-8 costs (including special education) have increased at an average annual rate of 4.8%. All regular education costs (PreK- 8) have increased at an average rate of 4.0%.

**Q** How does the district try to better manage costs in the budget?

**A** The district is diligent in its ongoing initiatives to gain cost savings and increased efficiency. Administration uses cooperative purchasing, consortium membership, competitive bidding and routine cost comparisons for most purchases as appropriate. In recent years, an Early Retirement Incentive program to our teachers and a CL&P lighting retrofit have saved tens of thousands of dollars. We maximize efficiencies in bus fleet management and building maintenance. Further savings in the budget result from our efforts to maximize grant opportunities and to leverage volunteers and contributions from the PTO, the WEF, the WMS music boosters and the WMS athletic boosters (these groups collectively represent over tens of thousands of dollars in program support annually).

**Q** *How does our teacher compensation compare to other districts?*

**A** The Board looked closely at comparative salary schedules during our teacher negotiations last fall. Our compensation scales are fair and generally tend to be near averages for both Windham County and DRG E. Our negotiated contractual increase over the next three years are 1.57%, 1.78% and 2.32% per year. Including step increments, the increases are 3.85%, 3.95% and 4.0 % for 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12, respectively. Statewide teacher settlement averages are 4.4%, 4.53%, and 4.47% (as of October 2008). Our recent teacher settlement adds two instructional days from teachers' professional days, and increases the instructional day by 10 minutes. In general, our teachers are committed, hardworking and effective, and many spend far more hours than are contractually required. The Board remains interested in exploring potential alternative compensation structures which better recognize teachers' knowledge and skills in their contributions to educational success. Our new contract provides

for an annual stipend for teachers who attain National Board Certification, and for tuition reimbursement under certain conditions.

**Q** *Can we manage healthcare insurance more effectively?*

**A** The cost of health insurance comprises 7.68% of our overall budget for 2008-09. The Board has frequently sought quotes from numerous insurance companies for both self-insured and fully-insured plans. We have also attempted to combine the group with the Town employees, and with Woodstock Academy employees. To date, we have found that our current self-insured plan is the most cost effective for the district. Our budgeted increase of 4.2% for health insurance this fiscal year is well below most benchmarks.

However, in our recent teacher's contract we agreed to a more standard plan design and to seek quotes for this under both fully insured and self-insured structures. We are currently in this process.

Our new teachers' contract increases the premium cost-share from its current 15% to 17.5% over its term. It also offers a High Deductible Health Care Plan with an HSA feature. These changes are steps toward greater personal responsibility for healthcare management.

**Q** *Why are transportation costs so high? Wouldn't it be less expensive to contract out for school bus transportation?*

**A** Transportation is a mandated service to ensure reasonable student access to school. Transportation comprises 4.47% of our overall budget for 2008-09 (or \$691,792). This amount includes expenses for regular education, special education, and high school transportation. Included in this amount are lease payments on 2 buses, fuel, maintenance, bus drivers and transportation supervisor compensation, benefits, insurance and repairs.

Capacity planning for our buses takes into account the fact that many parents drive their children to school. We manage our fleet and our employees to ensure safety and cost efficiency while not unduly inconveniencing students. We have 23 buses currently in service with an average age of 7.66 years and average mileage of 88,304. The buses are well maintained. We make every attempt to add two new buses to the fleet annually and retire older vehicles near the end of their useful service life. We may purchase or lease depending on budget funds available. This fiscal year (2008-09) we were not able to budget for any new buses.

Because we have students who attend schools outside of Woodstock, sometimes we have to contract with private providers to meet these transportation needs. Where possible, we coordinate with adjacent districts to share costs.

We manage our transportation expenses carefully and effectively. Periodically, the Board reviews the cost of maintaining our own fleet versus outsourcing transportation. To date, each time we have researched this alternative, we have determined that we save money by managing our own fleet. Woodstock is the second largest town in the state geographically and yet our transportation expenses, at \$527 per pupil, are 15% below the state average and in the lowest 28% for the state. Additionally, our bus drivers are local residents who know and care for our children, and who routinely go beyond their job requirements to ensure the safety of our students.

**Q** *Does Woodstock require a full-time superintendent?*

**A** The Board does not believe Woodstock would be well served by a part-time superintendent given the scope of responsibilities and demands of the position. There are only fourteen towns in Connecticut with a part-time superintendent. Of those towns, the student population ranges from 69 in Union to 611 in Lisbon. (Woodstock currently has 928 students in the district.) Each of those districts has only one school building. Six are PK–8 systems, three are K-8, two are PK–6, and the Gilbert School is 9-12.

**Q** *Does the district need four staff positions in the superintendent's office?*

**A** The district office consists of a payroll/financial assistant, .75 Accounts Payable (.25 Transportation) position, an administrative assistant, and a business manager. Often districts of our size have a separate business office. Major responsibilities of this staff include in-house payroll, human resources, state and federal testing and reporting requirements, grants management, accounts payable, inventory, budgeting, purchasing, business affairs, Board support, and school activity accounts. The business manager's hours often stretch into the evening. State and Federal reporting requirements and CMTs take up a significant amount of time. The Board feels that the district office is minimally staffed to achieve efficient business management and mandated reporting requirements. The \$448 per pupil that Woodstock spends on General Administration is 25% below the state average and 23% below that of DRG E.

**Q** *Can more money through grants be raised?*

**A.** The district applies for and manages grants from the federal and state governments and from private foundations. This year we received \$460,994 from federal and state grants. Smaller competitive grants are applied for annually by the district and individual teachers. Grant proceeds have been designated for special education program needs, our social worker and psychologist, reading intervention assistance, professional development and workshops for teachers, transportation and student safety, and character and drug education programs. The district actively seeks grant monies for relevant programs and needs for Woodstock, balancing potential funds available with the resources required to apply to and monitor the grant program.

**Q** *How many teachers' aides are employed by the district?*

**A** Currently the district employs 35 special education TAs (eight funded through grants) and sixteen regular education TAs (six funded through grants). Fourteen regular education assistants work at WES: four in reading intervention, five in Kindergarten classes, and one shared at each grade level (1, multi, 2, 3, and 4); One TA works in WMS Reading Intervention; and, one TA works Districtwide for students requiring English as a second language assistance.