

Spotlight on Education

The Woodstock Board of Education continues its series of Frequently Asked Questions regarding the education budget. You may receive more detail on these questions as well as any others you may have by calling the Superintendent, Dr. Baran, at 928- 7453. You may also contact us at asktheboard@woodstockschoools.net. FAQs are posted on the school website at www.woodstockschoools.net.

We invite community participation as we discuss the education budget and required reductions at our meeting on Thurs., March 26, at 7:00 pm in the WMS cafeteria. We also encourage the community to attend Board of Finance meetings where budget determinations will be made. The Board of Education will present to the Board of Finance on Tues., April 7 (7:30 pm Town Hall); the combined town and education budgets will be discussed on Tues., April 14 (7:30 pm Town Hall), and the Public Hearing is scheduled for Tues., April 21st (7:30 pm in the gym at WES).

Q: What is the purpose of the Math and Language Arts Coordinators in the Woodstock Pubic Schools?

A. The math and language arts coordinators, Mr. Casey and Mr. Mayer, are critical resources to assure that all of our students are learning the content and skills required to achieve in the 21st century. They are responsible for the consistent, integrated delivery of State- required standards of learning in each grade level, subject, and classroom. They support both teachers and students in both schools.

The coordinators help to develop and implement curricula for all class levels. They ensure alignment of our curricular content across grades and subject matter. This enables teachers to develop individual lesson plans and creative teaching approaches while ensuring consistency in student learning objectives. “Curriculum alignment” has become more complex due to the greater cross-disciplinary content required by State frameworks and by today’s standards of achievement. The coordinators also evaluate textbooks and other instructional materials and address any gaps between these materials and required standards. They bring current research in their field to the teaching faculty.

The coordinators help us to identify any areas of weaknesses of our students in the Connecticut standardized tests, and address any systemic gaps with targeted improvement plans. They also identify, assess and work individually with students who are falling behind. Math and language arts are cumulative subjects. Children who do not master the basic building blocks of these subjects will struggle to advance in all subject areas.

“No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) is the federal program which mandates that schools make adequate yearly progress (AYP) by annually improving test scores in math, reading and writing and, now, science as well. Part of the coordinators’ job is to analyze our test results to ensure we maintain AYP as required by NCLB. As a district we have done well in both the test scores and in helping to educate all students. The efforts of our math and language arts coordinators have been essential to this.

Q: Why are Special Education costs so high?

A: Special Education expenses are budgeted at \$2,471,238 for fiscal year 2008-2009. This represents approximately 16% of our total education budget. Approximately 118 children or 8.4% of Woodstock's students currently qualify for Special Education services. Of that Special Education population, 50 or 3.6% are at the Woodstock Elementary School, 34 or 2.4% are at the Woodstock Middle School, 21 or 1.5 % are at Woodstock Academy, 4 or .3% are at the ACT school, and 9 or .7% are at various special education facilities.

The Special Education account includes Special Education expenses at WES and WMS as well as all high school related Special Education costs. Included in this amount is compensation for 6 Special Education teachers, 35 assistants, 1 director, 1 medical assistant, 2 speech therapists, 1 speech therapist assistant, 1 social worker, 1 psychologist, outsourced services (PT, OT, outside evaluators/consultants), 1 office secretary; transportation, supplies, equipment, legal fees, Special Education tuition at Woodstock Academy and tuition for out-of-district placements at other public and private schools. A significant part of the special education budget is allocated to students at the high school level who are placed outside our designated high school. This year, of the nine (9) students who are in outplaced programs, seven (7) are at the high school level. The average cost for an outplacement (with transportation included) this year is \$42,884.

Federal law requires that we provide a free appropriate education and related necessary services, in the least restrictive environment, for our students with disabilities. The WBOE has an affirmative duty to identify children in need of Special Education services and, working with parents, develop a specific educational program to meet each individual student's needs. Federal and state law, as well as case law, have evolved in the past decade to be more prescriptive and comprehensive in defining the services and procedures required for Special Education. Beyond meeting our mandated requirements, the WBOE believes that providing appropriate support to children with disabilities is necessary to our educational mission and goals and is critical to the larger societal benefit of ensuring our functioning, free democracy.

Most Special Education costs are funded by the district. The State of Connecticut reimburses public schools for Special Education costs for an individual student when the cost exceeds a factor of 4.5 times (or \$46,382) the cost of regular education (\$10,307 - 07/08), or 1 time the cost if the student is placed by a state agency such as the Department of Children and Families or the courts. Of our 35 special education teacher assistants, 9 are funded wholly or partially with grants. (Cost of regular education defined as Net Current Expenditures as calculated by the State and includes both elementary and high school costs. For definition see <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2635&q=320562>.)

Special Education is effective, and early intervention is all the more so. Many students return to regular education or require a reduced level of service over time. This facilitates a higher level of student achievement and reduces Special Education expenses.

Q. How is the Woodstock Public Schools district budget managed throughout the year?

A. The district must keep educational spending within the total amount approved by the community. However, as events unfold throughout the school year, unanticipated expenses may arise. In order to remain within the approved budget, at some point in the fiscal year, the district will often freeze expenditures on less time- sensitive items. In practice this means that utilities and salaries will be paid on a regular basis but expenditures on books or computer supplies, for example, might be deferred until the district is sure that it is able to cover all mandatory expenses.

By doing this the district can absorb most unanticipated costs like emergency equipment repair and replacement, costs associated with new students moving to town, etc. As a result, many less time- sensitive expenditures will not be made until the end of the budget year, in the May-June timeframe. Each year it can be expected that there will be a significant upswing in expenses late in the school year. Additionally, since these end-of -year expenditures are made more than a year after the initial budget was formulated, sometimes the needs of the district have changed. It is prudent for the district to reassess its priorities and apply any available funds to these at this time.

This practice is generally followed during most years. It provides the taxpayers with the largest shelter against the district needing to return to the town for additional funding, while also making sure that funds are expended for the greatest benefit of the students at the time it is used.

Q. What percentage of the WPS budget is discretionary?

A. Generally the district is required to provide a free K-12 regular education, special education, transportation, utilities, student health, maintenance, etc. Last year these items accounted for 97.69% of the budget. However, within these items there is some latitude around educational programs such as SPICE, music, sports, educational coordinators, etc.

Some mandatory areas can be adjusted from year to year. For example in the 2008-2009 budget year, two replacement school buses were removed from the budget to protect educational programs. However, equipment maintenance and replacement can only be delayed for so long before those expenses will need to be made. In the 2009-2010 budget year it will be much more difficult to again defer funds to replace buses in an increasingly aging fleet.

Q: How does the WPS district fund its long term capital needs?

A: Each year the Long Range Planning Committee of the WBOE evaluates the district's projected capital requirements and prepares a Five Year Capital Needs Plan. Funding for these projects, however, is often deferred. The WBOE is prohibited from directly saving funds year to year. This leaves two sources of potential funding for long term capital needs. The first is to bond large capital items and take them to the town for a vote. The second method is to purchase capital items through the annual operating budget.

Most capital purchases, such as annual bus replacements, are budgeted as part of the operating budget. However, this practice necessarily displaces funding for the operating needs of the education system. It is not practical for larger projects, such as replacing and upgrading the HVAC system at the middle school. Eventually these items will have to be bonded through the town to be completed.

Finally, the WBOE has requested that the Board of Finance establish an account through the town for the purpose of accumulating funds from the WBOE's operating budget for capital and nonrecurring expenditures. These funds could be saved for larger purchases and used when needed. Since the town would control these funds, any capital expenditure of \$20,000 or more would need to be put to a public vote. We hope that the BOF will establish a procedure for this account which may give us, in some years, the latitude to contribute towards needed capital expenditures in a manner less disruptive to the operating budget.