

TOWN OF IPSWICH
Finance Committee Minutes
March 8, 2023
Ipswich Town Hall, Meeting Room A
25 Green St. Ipswich, MA

With a quorum present, the Chair called the meeting to order at 7:30pm.

Finance Committee members present: Michael Dougherty, Emilie Smith, Walter Hartford, Ken Swenson, Joseph Bourque, Rob White, Robert Chambers, Jamie Fay, Michael Schaaf

1. Welcome – Michael Dougherty

- Michael gave an overview of the agenda for the evening and upcoming meeting dates.

2. Citizens Queries – Michael Dougherty

- None

3. Meeting Minutes to Approve – Michael Dougherty

- None

**Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Hearing:
Schools – Budget Overview, Winthrop, Doyon**

4. Middle School – K. McMahon

Kathy McMahon, Principal of the Middle School, presented the budget. Kathy has been an Ipswich educator since 1991. The middle school is in their second year of the school improvement plan. Kathy went over the IMS educational goals. The first goal is to meet the needs of all students. This will be accomplished through promoting use of consistent data, using Lexia, iReady, and MCAS to assess and guide planning. They will also continue to provide support for emotional health in students and staff. The second goal is to create innovative learning environments. This will be done through implementation of the Illustrative Math Program, providing professional development for the humanities, and using budgetary resources to support student access to computer science courses. The third and final goal is to build best practices to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. This will be done through examining and supporting the newly developed World Language offerings and investigating ways to increase instructional humanities classes including ELA and civics.

All of the changes, along with direct support of the students, resulted in positive growth. MCAS scores this year were very high and ranked highly amongst other North Shore communities. The budget this year will support the growth in the civics and ELA curriculum, fund the computer science program, support the increased need for Special Education, and continue the implementation of the Illustrative Math Curriculum. It will also ensure that students have access to project-based learning supplies and will allow the school to continue to offer World Language curriculum. The middle school budget is mainly impacted by a large increase in special education. This budget will support a new special education teacher and two paraeducators. Kathy also went over other funding sources such as IDEA Grant and the Special Education Revolving Fund.

Michael asked about the decreased math material line. Kathy said they brought in iReady which is a math program used to assess progress three times per year. That was paid for with ESSER funds. Mike asked what the plan is going forward to continue funding this after it is ESSER funding goes away. Kathy said she hopes to continue to use the program whether or not they get the funding for it. Michael asked Kathy how the students are doing this year compared to last year. Kathy said social isolation was a huge concern last year and that was replaced by phones and screens. Students are still reliant on those things and reluctant to do social events and they see a huge increase in anxiety, depression, and

eating disorders. Mike asked if we are seeing an increase with the negative side effects of social media. Kathy said the majority of bullying that they deal with is done online, outside of schools. Kathy said the access to inappropriate material kids have is alarming.

Emilie asked if there is organizational leadership in the team. Kathy said she has a team leader team which is made up of two teachers from each grade level. They facilitate what's going on in the schools. Kathy and the assistant principal do all evaluations. Emilie asked how many FTE's they have. They have 9 non-PTS, and 63.9 FTE's total. Joe asked about the acronyms and abbreviations, and Kathy went through the abbreviations in the budget book. Ken asked about Whittier and if we are a member, Kathy said yes. We are not a member of Essex Tech but we can send students there only if Whittier doesn't have that program. Essex Tech is now using a lottery. Whittier uses an application process. We are not guaranteed any slots in Whittier. Kathy said she would like it if they could be a part of helping the schools select students, but they do not want input. Jamie said he is shocked that 30% of the students are on IEP's. Kathy said it is not just happening in Ipswich. It has to do with a lot of things including Covid and a lack of reading. Kathy said the change that she sees in students now is alarming. Everything they do is digital. They don't go outside and play anymore. Jamie said the positions that are being added are needed to help students, but it is concerning that the funding for those will likely go away soon and Jamie is concerned that we aren't going to be able to afford to keep those positions. Ken asked if we have members on the board at Whittier and asked if they have policies on how students are accepted into the school. Kathy said the school is in high demand and they are trying to figure out the best system for bringing kids in. Ken also asked about the undistributed athletics line because it is in the budget on one sheet but not on another. Dr. Blake said it is paid for by the athletic revolving fund. Rob asked how computer science is funded and how many students take it. Kathy said every year every student takes computer science. Rob asked about the Payne Grant contribution for outdoor dining and seating and half basketball court. Shawn Fitzgerald, Assistant Principal, said there were price increases after Covid so they are still working on this. They put it out for bid last fall and the bids were way higher than expected. They are planning to ask the Feoffees if they can use some of the turned back funds from over the years. Bob said he was happy to see they increased the computer science faculty. Every student has a Chromebook which is supplied by the district. They are able to take it home, do their homework, charge it, and bring it back the next day.

Michael said we are transitioning all of our school work and text books to online instead of using paper. He asked Kathy if this is a mixed message for kids since we are also trying to limit their screen time. Kathy said as a faculty they talk about getting our kids up and moving and away from screens as much as possible so they can strike a balance. Kate said as a parent she really likes that students aren't allowed to have phones during the school day or at lunch, and they also do not allow phones on class trips or busses.

5. High School – J. Mitchell

Jonathan Mitchel, Principal of the High School, said this is his fifth year at the high school. Jonathan has an assistant principal and noted how critical that role is. Jonathan went over the educational goals, which are to inspire joy in learning, improve career pathways, and enhance achievement through advanced coursework. This year the high school will continue to develop and refine career pathways and work with local employers to identify areas of needs and necessary credentials for careers. They will also strive to improve academic achievement as measured by state standards. They will broaden offerings in advanced coursework and provide professional development to staff to equip them with the instructional and assessment tools needed to create a supportive learning environment for all students.

Jonathan went over the budget highlights. The net budget increase is \$42,504, which is a .60% increase. This budget supports funding for substitute teachers, teaching materials and stipends, curriculum resources for the math department, and an increase in the library/media center textbooks. Professional salaries have gone up by 20%. Jonathan went over enrollment and projected enrollment for next year. He also went over the breakdown and comparison for the budget, as well as other funding sources. Jonathan said pre-pandemic, our MCAS scores were about 10 points higher than the rest of the state. Now scores have been about 20 points higher. Students also do well on the SAT's and are above the state average. There has been a slight increase in students taking AP exams, because they are offering more classes.

Michael asked about the positions that are funded by the ESSER funds. Jonathan said one of the positions is shared with the middle school and they will need to continue this position because its required by the state. The social

worker position has become essential as a mental health support. Michael asked what the justification is for cutting the drama class, even with lower enrollment. Jonathan said the average elective class size would have been 5, and ideally it should be 10. Michael said he had heard this could be due to where the course is placed in the schedule. Jonathan said if a course is only offered once, there just isn't time for it to fit in a student's schedule because they choose a different elective during that time.

Emilie asked about the difference in the subs. Jonathan said sometimes subs are needed to cover sick days, sometimes it's for professional development. Emilie echoed Michael that it is surprising to see such a small budget increase and asked Jonathan if he feels like they are missing anything. Jonathan said he thinks they have to be responsible with the school budget and two years ago the high school had the largest increase compared to the other schools. They have to make sure the wealth is distributed across the school district and this year the high school just doesn't need as much. Emilie also asked how many FTE's there are. 83 employees, 65 are teachers, and 15 are non-PTS.

Michael asked about the drama teacher being cut and asked how they will know when to bring that back. Jonathan said they didn't cut the program and if enough students sign up for those drama course, they would seek out an English teacher that has a background in drama to also teach those drama courses.

Joe said the investment in career pathways sounds like a good idea. Joe asked about the CNC classes, Jonathan said it's about 50-60 kids and usually those kids go into engineering or drafting. Jonathan said it's nice to be able to offer students these opportunities here in Ipswich without having to go to Whittier or Essex Tech.

Walter asked Jonathan if there is enough money in the budget to support a theater program. Jonathan said they are not cutting the theater program. There will still be an after-school program with a play every year. It's just difficult to justify continuing a course if it is under-enrolled.

Jamie asked how many students go to college. Jonathan said it is over 90%. Jamie said the FTE's are being reduced by 3.5. Special education is reducing by 2, health services by .6. Jonathan said they are being reduced in the appropriated budget and funded through IDEA and ESSER. The health services position is gone and one paraeducator was reduced.

Rob asked what percentage of students are taking the SAT's. Jonathan said he doesn't know but he can get that information. Rob also said the AP scores are impressive. Jonathan said over a quarter of the students graduating have taken at least one AP class.

Bob asked about Jonathan's comment where he said the English teacher could teach a drama class. He asked if that is possible. Jonathan said they have one teacher that teaches in both science and math departments. They have one math teacher that also teaches a business course. In a small school, it's good to have teachers than can teach multiple classes. Bob asked about college and if it is still recommended for most students. Jonathan said going to college is always worth it in the long run, but the guidance counselors work closely with students and families to find the best fit so that students get a good return on their investment.

Rob asked about the dropout rate, Jonathan said they are between 1 and 1.5%. Rob also asked about making the rooms more STEM friendly, Jonathan said this summer they are converting one of the classrooms to a science classroom.

Ken asked about the athletics funding and said it looks like most of it is paid from the revolving fund. He asked if it has always been that way, Jonathan said head coaches are paid out of the budget and JV coaches are paid for out of the revolving fund.

Walter asked about school attendance and asked if there can be excused absences for students who have good attendance but have an opportunity to do something and need to be out for a few days. Jonathan said they are looking at that but they are also guided by MA state laws.

Michael asked if students are still required to have community service hours. Jonathan said yes, 30 hours by junior year. Michael asked if there is a direct line for students to see volunteer opportunities for town government. There

are a lot of departments in town that could use some extra help. Jonathan said they don't have that but he thinks it's a great idea. Jonathan also said they have a bridge program for seniors which allows them to get a job in the community a few hours a week during the school day.

Kate said that she would hope and expect conversations to continue with the finance director to ensure we continue to put on drama productions at the high school like we have always done.

6. Central Office and Administration – Dr. Blake

Dr. Blake presented the district-wide buildings and operations budget. The high school is 23 years old now and in need of some repair. Dr. Blake is requesting a debt exclusion next week for roof replacements for the high school/middle school along with the elementary schools. There is a budget increase of \$238,469, which represents a 10.99% increase. This increase will cover increased utility costs, continued major repairs of all of the buildings, and continued repairs on buildings and systems due to the age of the buildings. Utility cost increases are offset by the revolving fund.

Dr. Blake then presented the district-wide and central office budget. This budget includes the special education budget as well as contract increases while they are being negotiated, until they are moved into the correct category. The net budget increase is \$803,376, which is a 6.95% increase. This budget includes long term subs, HR development, the performing arts director, professional development for staff, the part time district-wide parent/student liaison, and an increase of 2 FTE's for ELL. There are also significant increases on fixed costs including a 7.6% increase in health insurance, and an increase in the pension obligation by 19%.

Michael asked why they moved the HR department. Dr. Blake said just so they have their own line item. They have an HR director and a part time assistant that does the benefits.

Emilie asked if the performing arts director is more facilities-based vs. student-based. Dr. Blake said yes and he focuses more on lighting, sound, and set up. Emilie also asked for the administration's org chart and job descriptions. Emilie said she would like to see all of the roles and responsibilities to make sure we aren't missing any gaps or overlaps, especially when considering the two new vice principal positions.

Michael asked what the central office is comprised of. Dr. Blake said he reports directly to the School Committee. The office is himself, his administrative assistant, the director of teaching and learning, the director of student services, and the finance director. The finance director has 5 direct reports under him as well. There are also administrative assistants.

Walter said going into town meeting, it would be good to have a sense of the cost of not doing something. If we could see something on what we have spent so far would be good. Walter asked why the pension obligation went up by 19%? It's an increase in the district's contributions required for employees who are on any one of two retirement plans. Michael said for those who don't know, teachers contribute into MTRS and staff who are not teachers contribute to Essex Retirement.

Jamie asked about the ESSER funding and asked what this year's funding is vs. next years. Dr. Blake said they don't have that information on hand. Jamie asked what the future looks like for that funding after next year. Dr. Blake said that next year is the last year of that funding. Jamie said he is concerned we have funded a bunch of positions with a temporary funding source and he said he doesn't think the plan was to make those permanent positions, but now it looks like that's what's happening and Jamie said he isn't sure we can afford that. The anticipated ESSER funding for fiscal year 24 is \$584k, which would be the last year for the funding. For this fiscal year, they are using \$311k. Jamie said he is concerned about moving these positions to the regular budget or reserves. Jamie also asked what the student parent liaison position does. Dr. Blake said it's a district-wide part time position that works with some of the neediest families in the community to help secure resources like housing and food, and also helps to facilitate communication between the school and the families. Dr. Blake said she is a significant asset to the community. Jamie said he understands it is a benefit but it is a new position and perhaps it's not a needed position, and can be done through each of the individual schools. Dr. Blake said eventually they will need to have hard conversations about which positions they can continue to fund after ESSER

funds run out. Jamie said he would suggest they start having those conversations now.

Ken asked about a state-wide superintendent's organization and asked if there is an effort in that group to say that we can't afford unfunded mandates. The states keep putting pressure on a local level and it's not sustainable. Dr. Blake said it depends on the issue. The MA Association of School Superintendents has a legislative agenda that looks at any number of things. The North Shore Superintendents round table is very active in working with legislatures and helping them see these issues. Bruce Tarr has been very active within the group.

Rob asked about the central office budget and asked if they are moving money into the school stabilization budget in the spring. Dr. Blake said they are moving \$2.5M. At the end of FY24 they would have \$4.2M after the draw of \$900k for the budget. The bulk of that is the override funds that came through for FY23. Rob commented that as the years go on and teachers get more money through steps and lanes, those contracts are going to eat through the budget. He asked if he could see a grid for the salary schedule. Bob said so far it seems the roofs are a big problem as well as the elementary schools. Bob asked if there are any other major problems that need to be addressed. Michael said they will discuss that under long range planning on Tuesday.

Seamus Kelly, 4 Applewood Drive, spoke about the drama department. Seamus said a lot of students have struggled with mental health, including himself. He did not feel like he had a circle or a community, and then found the theater department. Seamus said he has never felt such a warm welcoming into a community and urged the Finance Committee to take the mental health of students into account in regards to this program.

Anna Marr, 8 Hammatt Street, said theater classes are so important because they put our students on a career path. Theater classes don't just prepare people for auditions and performances, they help people with interviews, presentations, public speaking, and everyday life. Anna also said middle schoolers have less responsibilities like homework and jobs, which is why their after-school drama program works well. High school students are not able to participate in after school drama programs as easily and some people won't be able to participate at all if there aren't opportunities during the school day. If the class is cut, students won't know to request it and therefore it will never be added back in. There has been two years of low enrollment, partially because it was not fun to take theater classes over zoom with online learning. We need to strengthen the department now, not abandon it.

Jane Masco, 24 Meadowview Lane, is a mom of a sophomore and an eighth grader in Ipswich. Jane is an engineer and has never done theater, but she thinks it is important for the school system to maintain well-rounded offerings. The drama cut is decreasing the expenses by \$38k, which is a .5% of the budget. It is such a small budgetary decrease that would result in a huge negative increase to our students. To get into a college that focuses on theater, students need to have theater classes on their resume. Without those classes, it could be impossible to get into those colleges. The school has stated that the afterschool programs and the performance will not be affected, but the person that holds the drama position at the school is the one that directs the performance. It is hard to see how those performances won't suffer. Jane said she received data from the school because she wanted to look at the distribution of like courses. On average, 60% of students that want to take these courses can't because of the schedule. We can't take low numbers and assume students don't want to take the course. We need to look at all the data to see who wants to take the classes and who doesn't get in. Jane asked that we look at the budget and find \$38k to give the students the education they deserve.

Mark Allman, High Street, said the process of this decision is very frustrating. The budget was drafted at 4pm on a Tuesday and the School Committee approved it the following Thursday. There was no opportunity for community review or input. Mark said the problem is not the enrollment, it's how scheduling is done in the school. Allowing students to use the R block, and allowing opportunities to earn credits after school would be a solution to the problem. The parents are very frustrated because they have been asking for an opportunity to sit down with Dr. Blake and the School Committee to discuss this and have not been given the opportunity to do so. Mark chose to live in Ipswich because it's a town that funds the arts. Mark's son is a senior and is going to a competitive college for the theater program, which he would not have gotten into without his classes in theater. Mark has been told that the School Committee does not have the authority to amend the school budget, but he does not think that could be true. Mark asked the Finance Committee to please make a formal request to the School Committee and the superintendent to amend the budget and restore the position. Jamie said the total amount of funding available from the town is appropriated at town meeting and there are other funding sources that the town does not have to approve. The School Committee has complete autonomy over their

budget. Any suggestions the Finance Committee makes are advisory.

7. FY2024 School Budget Discussion – M. Dougherty/ K. Elliot/ Dr. Blake

Jamie said it would be relevant for the budget discussion to know where we stand in terms of override calculations. Walter said we will hear more information on that next week and we will understand it before we vote on the budget. Michael said he thinks Jamie had valid concerns about the salaried positions being funded with ESSER funds. He is concerned all of these will be absorbed into the budget and we will blow the override funds. Michael said he agrees with Jamie that those discussions should happen this year so we can avoid a storm next year. Jamie said next year there will be a lot of salary increases and the budget is going to get hit hard. Kate said she agrees that they need to have those discussions this year. We had hoped the ESSER funded positions would only need to be temporary, in hopes that the learning loss would be caught up on within a few years. That is not the case though and these positions are still needed and the need is not going away. We need to stay as close to the override projections as we can while still meeting the needs of our students.

8. New/Old Business – Michael Dougherty

- none

9. Adjourn – Michael Dougherty

- Motion to adjourn made by Jamie, seconded by Ken
→ *Motion passed unanimously, 9-0*

Respectfully Submitted By
Alyson von der Esch
3-18-23