

# Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee (ABRSC) FY16 Budget Meeting Minutes (approved 2/26/15)

Library  
R.J. Grey Junior High School

Saturday, January 31, 2015  
8:30 a.m.

*Members Present:* Brigid Bieber, Mary Brolin (left at 12:30), Dennis Bruce, Michael Coppolino, Amy Krishnamurthy, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, Kathleen Neville, Maria Neyland, Deanne O’Sullivan (left 3:05), Kristina Rychlik

*Members Absent:* none

*Others:* Marie Altieri, Deborah Bookis, Glenn Brand, Mary Emmons, Clare Jeannotte, Beth Petr, members of the Acton and Boxborough Boards of Selectmen and Finance Committees, and members of the public

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The ABRSC was called to order at 8:30 a.m. by Kristina Rychlik, Chairwoman.

- School Committee Chair’s Introduction and Welcome - *Kristina Rychlik*
- Superintendent’s Introduction and Welcome - *Glenn Brand*

## 1. Panel 1: Budget Overview

### a. Superintendent’s Budget Overview - *Glenn Brand*

The proposed FY16 budget totals \$80,197,455, representing a \$3,742,332 or 4.89% increase from FY15. This allows the District to “open the doors” in September to receive students with a continuation of current services and programs. It does not provide for new innovation, improvement or expansion.

### b. Financial Highlights FY16 Budget - *Clare Jeannotte*

### c. Staffing and Enrollment - *Marie Altieri*

It was emphasized that some numbers are still very much estimates (State Aid, Transportation Aid, Circuit Breaker, Middlesex Retirement, Health Insurance). It is also very hard to compare numbers to previous years due to this being the first year of full regionalization.

## Questions:

Several questions were asked about how decreasing student enrollment would affect the number of classrooms in future years. Marie Altieri responded that for 10 years, the District was growing with enrollment outpacing the number of classrooms that were available. From 2000-2010, elementary schools were at a plateau for enrollment and a number of “less than desirable” spaces had to be used for classes like art and music. As the number of classrooms needed has dropped, the District has been able to start addressing some of these inappropriate spaces.

A question was asked about an increase in stipends (slide 37). This is a reclassification of money for R and Ds worked in the summer and a change in accounting procedures only. The high cost of out of district student placements was discussed. Mary Emmons stated that while the District is always looking to bring students back into our classrooms, we are also always looking to keep students in district.

The question was asked if slide 32 (FY16 Assessment Revision – Elementary Debt Paid by Towns) is an unexpected cost of regionalization. Clare Jeannotte clarified that it is just a shift due to Appendix A of the Regional Agreement. Regarding slide 37, it was asked, “What percentage of the \$576,344 in the \$ Increase column is allotted to support services? The Committee asked about the practice and success of cutting some full time positions into part time positions, saving benefits costs.

It was noted that it is not always the best in terms of consistency in curriculum and for students. Attention was paid to slide 47 (Low Income Enrollment Trend) and the changes in the state as well as our two towns. Marie Altieri noted that there are things demographically that are happening with housing, mobility and turnover. Ninety new students were identified this year that we can provide assistance to. Educationally it has an impact as well due to the supports required for these students. This is happening in surrounding communities and is affected by the economy as well as other factors.

Bill Mullin asked why we call one group “low income students”. Mary Emmons said that low income students are at more risk for disabilities but often have education deficits as well. Many have moved often and missed some instruction. Not all low income students have these issues. He stressed that a lot of innovation happened in the District when the overrides took place and school building/renovations happened. Glenn Brand clarified that the proposed budget does not include funding for possible new innovative ideas.

Bob Evans stressed that the 6.8% assessment increase for Acton is not viable. Every time a teaching position is cut, another is added. This means high levels of increases will continue in the future. Bob noted that the last time this kind of decline in enrollment took place, teachers were laid off, including art, music and gym. Herman Kabakoff stated that most people did not get a 7% raise last year so he related this budget increase to lowering the quality of life in Acton if it goes through.

2. **Panel 2: Departmental Budget Overviews**

- a. Community Education – *Erin Bettez*
- b. Curriculum and Assessment - *Deborah Bookis*
- c. Facilities and Transportation – *JD Head*
- d. Educational Technology – *Amy Bisiewicz*

**Questions**

12:15 *Lunch Break*

3. **Panel 3: Impact of Increasing High Needs Students**

- a. Pupil Services Departmental Budget Overview and Student Trends – *Mary Emmons, Interim Director of Pupil Services*
- b. Proposed Positions
  1. 0.6 Elementary ELL Teacher – *Suzanne Szwarczewicz, ELL (English Language Learners)*
  2. 1.0 Jr. High Educational Team Leader/Transition/Academic Support - *Andrew Shen, JH Principal*
  3. 0.6 Elementary Special Education Teacher - *Lynne Newman, Gates Principal and Lynne Laramie, Elementary Coordinator of Pupil Services*
  4. 0.4 Elementary School Psychologist - *Hilary Bonnell, Elementary Counseling/Psych Chair*
  5. 0.6 Occupational Development Program Assistant (19 hours) – *Mary Emmons*

**Questions**

Mary Emmons described the increased job training and planning for transitions that is needed for High School students in the “High Needs” group.

The Committee had many questions about the District’s lack of resources for ELL students including the lack of instructional time as mandated by the DESE. DESE does not regulate the ratios of staff to students in this area, but they can cite a district for levels that are too low. Our District has been cited for this issue. Brigid Bieber spoke for a number of Committee members expressing concern that the District is not doing what that they should for these students. She is fully on board for these proposals. She said, “The reality is that it is expensive to educate students that need these services but it is our obligation to do this.”

Mike Coppolino asked if it is a common model to have 3 resource models in elementary schools. Lynne Laramie replied that it is. She attends many meetings from EDCO and comparable schools and their caseloads are much smaller than AB staff's. We are asking teachers now to take on 3 grade levels, many subjects, in our resource rooms.

Dennis Bruce requested that Boxborough information be added to slides 93 and 108 regarding out of district students. This will be done for the Budget Hearing on 2/5/15. He also asked that slide 127 "Staffing Structure" be included next year as well because the efficiency of its layout was valuable.

Mike Coppolino talked about accountability. He asked if there is a way over time to measure if adding staff now would actually save money. He questioned, "Are we making any progress, or are we just feeling better about it?" He knows it is difficult, but would like to see if decisions being made are really having a measurable positive effect. He wants to look at a longer term, big picture of adding staff. This was requested similarly years ago when reading specialists were added.

Bill Guthlein spoke on behalf of the Sped PAC about how happy they are that the School Committee and Administration recognize the increasing number of special education students' and ELL needs and they are trying to address it. He feels slide 100's numbers – Staffing/Special Education and total student population – Oct 1 is too low. Lynne Laramie explained that it is purely how many 6<sup>th</sup> graders are leaving and how many are coming up on IEPs. The numbers may be going down, but the needs are going up. This is based on actual numbers. Bill feels this slide is misleading. He asked how this budget will address the Grade 4 and Grade 7 ELA growth issue that exists. Lynne Newman suggested that adding a learning center and creating smaller groups in the Centers provides more instruction and individual attention. Deborah Bookis noted that it will be a different cohort, or group of students next year so you cannot compare those scores. Deb does agree with Lynne's point.

Andrew Shen said that the disciplinary literacy focus will help all students with their writing including those receiving special education services. Increased help from the reading teacher will also help.

A mother spoke from the audience stating that her child who receives services is doing well, but others are not. She stated that when you look at successful models, 1:1 instruction and 120 minutes of instruction, as early as you can close the gap, ultimately will reduce some of the burden the district is dealing with now. She spoke in favor of certified instruction, not just another adult in the room with students.

#### **4. Superintendent Closing Remarks**

Glenn Brand thanked everyone who made this morning possible and those who attended. This budgetary request does not include all of the resources or personnel that were recommended by the Administration and staff. It is felt it is what would be educationally responsible given these tight fiscal times, including some modest funding for repair and maintenance of our facilities.

#### **Questions**

Steve Noone spoke from the Acton Finance Committee, thanking Glenn Brand and Clare Jeannotte for the "best Budget Saturday he has ever attended and the most transparent budget." He expressed concern with the amount of reserves being used and the sustainability of budget increases for the Town of Acton. Katie Green spoke from the Acton Board of Selectmen. Although she is concerned with a 6.9% increase in Acton's assessment, her bigger concern is how the assessment increase will be presented at Town Meeting. She urged the Committee to be clear about what people are voting on for their assessments. She mentioned the side payments from the towns, that were not included in what was voted on for this current year. This underinflated last year's budget vote, in her opinion. This is why the majority of the BOS voted to not recommend last year's School Budget and why the increase so high this year. She strongly urged the

Committee not to include that money in the FY16 budget and said that she will speak up about it, if it is not presented correctly.

Glenn Brand explained that the handout had two options given the recent change in Table 6. As a result, there may be concern about voting a final assessment at this time. An alternative would be for the Committee to just vote the appropriation. The second option is the more comprehensive vote but reflecting the modification to Table 6 inclusive of that debt assessment. Another vote could be taken at the Budget Hearing next Thursday night.

Mike Coppolino commented that Katie had a point about the number stated at Acton Town Meeting. He asked the Committee to consider her suggestion seriously, as difficult as that might be. Paul Murphy agreed stating that the budget that was voted and what is being used are different. Clare Jeannotte said that there has never been any interest in not being transparent with the numbers.

Marie Altieri said that the Administration struggled with how to show it all. OPEB is separated out on the line item. Middlesex Retirement is included in the FY16 number so they exactly reflect our budget. She hears Katie's point, and a compromise is that in the Table 6, it is within and without. The Table 6 in the Budget Binder has it on the bottom, so it is explained. It was significant that Middlesex Retirement made that late decision and the Town of Acton was very helpful that they handled it. We need to be clear about how it is presented.

Regarding possible cuts, Mike Coppolino stated that while the Capital Plan study is important, if something has to be cut, compared to critical staffing needs, he asked the Administration to consider cutting the study. Paul Murphy has heard of less expensive ways of doing this kind of study. Glenn and JD Head have discussed spreading it over a number of years if the Committee wanted to consider that.

**ABRSC Preliminary FY16 Budget VOTE:**

Maria Neyland moved that:

***the total appropriation for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District for the fiscal year of July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016 be set at \$80,197,455.***

Brigid Bieber seconded the motion.

Dennis Bruce will vote against the motion, not because he doesn't support the request, but because today's decision does not mean it will happen. He asked the Superintendent and Administration to take a step back and consider if the District could survive without some of these requests. He advocated for a deeper discussion of this budget at the Budget Hearing. He is concerned about a sustainability issue at this amount. Mike Coppolino agreed.

Kristina Rychlik summarized that this is an issue everyone has been grappling with but this is a preliminary budget and working with all the groups, we are only part way through the process. A vote on this motion means the budget will not go up. The Administration is willing to recommend proposed cuts. Brigid Bieber made a small suggestion calling it "service creep" that bus passing should be looked at as an issue. Secondly she suggested looking at additional programming that could bring revenue to the district, such as tutoring. She stated that guidance must be given to the Administration, not just voting down the budget today. Maya Minkin, like other members, questioned the high cost of the Capital Study.

While the Administration was asked to bring proposed cuts to the next meeting, Kristina feels the Administration should be allowed to make the final decision, after hearing from the Committee.

Maria Neyland stated that there was complete transparency in Boxborough about Middlesex Retirement and who would pay. She echoed the comment that this is the most transparent budget ever. Several weeks ago the increase was 7.6%

and it has been decreased. A vote on this proposed budget is a statement of values for our educational system. This is the budget we need is what we say today. More specific direction can be given at the next meeting.

Glenn Brand stated that this budget represents what he believe is his and his administration's responsibility to present for educating our students. They have talked about what could be cut if needed, based on School Committee decisions. He could bring these proposed reductions to the Committee next week. This will be the first time the School Committee will see proposed reductions and another School Committee meeting may be needed to decide. The final budget must be voted by February 20th

Dennis Bruce stated that voting today does not mean he's not supportive of the effort made on the proposed budget. In his opinion, it says a hard look needs to be taken at the budget. Marie Altieri replied that the increase is high and the Administration understands that. They will bring a list to the next meeting of where the budget can be tightened. Last year at the end, \$700,000 was cut. Lots of cuts have been made over the years meaning that there is very little contingency left for anything we may need.

It was noted that per the ABRSD Regional Agreement, *"The preliminary budget shall be approved by a majority of the members of the Committee from each member town."* This preliminary vote is required by 1/31/15.

The Committee **VOTED** and the motion was approved:

YES: Bieber, Krishnamurthy, Minkin, Murphy, Neville, Neyland, Rychlik

NO: Bruce, Coppolino

A number of School Committee and Board members thanked the Administration for one of the clearest budget presentations they have seen from the District.

The ABRSC adjourned at 3:13 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: see Agenda and Budget Binder posted on the School Committee website

***ABRSC FY16 Annual Budget Hearing will be held Thursday, 2/5/15, at 7:00 p.m. in the R.J. Grey Junior High Library***  
*Materials to be posted at <http://www.abschools.org/school-committee/meetings-agendas-packets-and-minutes>*