

BERLIN BOARD OF EDUCATION
January 15, 2020
MINUTES
SPECIAL MEETING

Attendance: Richard Aroian
Julia Dennis – Arrived at 6:53 p.m.
Mary Ellen Maloney – Arrived just prior to 6:07 p.m.
Jaymee Miller – Departed at 8:00 p.m.
Timothy Oakes
Adam Salina
Kari Sassu, Ph.D. – Arrived at 6:21 p.m.
Tracy Sisti - Absent
Matthew Tencza
Student Representatives: Jenna Smalley - Absent
Ryan McGowan

Also in attendance: Superintendent of Schools Brian J. Benigni; Director of Business Operations Jeffrey Cugno; Director of Pupil Personnel Services Linda Holian; Supervisor of Special Education – Elementary Michelle Zeuschner; Supervisor of Special Education – Secondary Cindy Martin; Director of Literacy and Social Studies Laurie Gjerpen; Director of Mathematics and Science Kara Watson; and Director of Athletics Jeff Mauri.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Aroian called the meeting to order at 6:06 p.m. in the Board of Education (“the Board”) meeting room at 238 Kensington Road, Berlin, Connecticut.

II. AUDIENCE OF CITIZENS

Mr. Aroian opened the meeting to members of the Berlin community. They were invited to share their thoughts or questions as a follow up to the budget presentations on Monday, January 13, 2020. There was no participation from the community.

III. 2020-2021 PROPOSED BUDGET PRESENTATION

A. Special Education Budget

Director of Pupil Personnel Services Linda Holian, along with Supervisor of Special Education – Secondary Cindy Martin and Supervisor of Special Education – Elementary Michelle Zeuschner, presented the 2020-2021 Special Education Budget and responded to questions from the Board concerning their presentation. Board members were provided with a copy of the presentation. Ms. Holian indicated their goal tonight was to provide Board members with an overview of Special Education trends state wide as well as within Berlin, the expenses and funding sources that help to offset the general education budget. This includes students serviced both in the Berlin school district as well as out-of-district and the staff currently that support the diverse needs of the students. Ms. Holian acknowledged Lora Curtis, Ashley Dorsey, Doreen Guy, JoAnn Walicki, Sue McNally, Cindy Martin and Michelle Zeuschner for their help in creating tonight’s budget presentation.

Ms. Holian shared data from October 1, 2019 and also current numbers, as of today, as Special Education is constantly changing. Resources used were from the New England School Development Counsel, Berlin Special Education Trend Report for 2018-2019, Connecticut State Department of

Education and Effective School Solutions. Ms. Holian reported the Special Education Budget is a large part of the local budget. Although overall, enrollment has gone down state and district-wide, Special Education numbers continue to increase, and students with disabilities require more resources to meet their individual needs, which increases costs.

Special Education Trend Data in Connecticut: The number of students with special needs continues to increase as overall student enrollment decreases. Many students with disabilities require more resources to meet their individual needs. Included in Ms. Holian's presentation was the Connecticut K-12 Special Education Prevalence Rate for the past thirteen years, which shows the prevalence rate of Special Education continues to increase in the state; the Prevalence Numerators & Denominators, which shows that General Education numbers are going down and Special Education continues to increase; Prevalence Counts: Rate of Change, which shows the rate of change in child count between General Education and Special Education; and the Berlin K-12 Special Education Prevalence Rate, which shows Berlin's prevalence rate over the past nine years. Last year, Berlin's prevalence rate was 13.75%.

Historical Perspective on Education Costs in Berlin: Ms. Holian shared the Special Education trend report for Berlin over the last ten years, which included the total General Education expenditures (excluding fringe benefits); the total Special Education expenditures (excluding fringe benefits); and the total outside Special Education placement expenditures (excluding fringe benefits) trend line. Currently, the district has twenty-nine (29) students out of district, six (6) of which participate in the CHOICE program and one (1) expelled student.

Pupil Personnel Services Today: As of October 1, 2019, one hundred sixty-three (163) students are eligible to receive accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (ADA); twenty-four (24) students receive services in out-of-district facilities; ten (10) students attend parent choice programs such as magnet schools; and six (6) students receive service plans. Four hundred forty (440) students receive direct Special Education services from the staff and schools. As of this evening, there are four hundred fifty (450) students receiving direct Special Education services from the staff and schools, one hundred seventy-one (171) students are eligible to receive accommodations under Section 504, seven (7) students are receiving service plans and twenty-nine (29) students are receiving services in out-of-district facilities. In order to be eligible for Special Education services, students must be identified as having one of the eleven (11) disabilities referenced on the graph entitled Students By Primary Exceptionality. The most prevalent disability in the district is Learning Disability with one hundred forty-two (142) students followed by Speech or Language with ninety-nine (99) students. Autism is on the rise across the state.

As of July 1, 2019 through January 10, 2020 Unexpected Costs: Twenty (20) new students have moved to Berlin requiring Special Education services. This does not include new referrals or students entering from the Birth to Three system; three (3) of these students were attending a Magnet school and one (1) was attending Saint Paul's; three (3) of the eighteen (18) students have significant needs requiring paraprofessional support, outside evaluations, and/or specialize programming; and two (2) of these students are attending other programs in surrounding towns due to DCF, for which the district is financially responsible.

Other Unexpected Costs Since July 1, 2019: Typically the district does four (4) neuropsychological evaluations in the year. As of today, the district will be completing seven (7) neuropsychological evaluations, which cost \$2,100. Last year, no independent education evaluations were completed; however, this year, there is a request for three (3). These evaluations can range from \$2,000 for an outside speech and language evaluation to \$8,000 for a psychological evaluation.

Special Education Drivers 2020-2021: The total Special Education staff has increased 27.8% over the past seven years due to new programs to meet the needs of students. In 2013, there were 106 staff members. As of today, there are 135.5 staff members. Included in the presentation was a breakdown of the number of Special Education students, Special Education teachers, paraprofessionals, specialized programs and related service staff for each school and the Berlin Transition Academy.

Include in the presentation was the tuition for out-of-district Berlin students and out-of-district Berlin/CHOICE students.

Special Education Department Operational Budget: In terms of Pupil Personnel, there is an increase of 157%. Ms. Holian is looking to fund the ESS Program at the middle school.

Extended School Year: Ms. Martin provided the historical costs, student count and staffing for the extended school year program for the past three years.

Additional Special Education Funding Sources: Currently, 5.6 certified staff and 10 FTE paraprofessional positions are partially funded through the IDEA Part B, Section 611 grant. One FTE paraprofessional is funded through the IDEA 619 grant.

The Excess Cost grant is Connecticut's method for paying extraordinary Special Education costs. The Excess Cost grant reimburses districts when expenditures for educating a Special Education student are 4.5 times greater than the district's spending per pupil. Berlin's per pupil expenditure is \$17,093 x 4.5 or \$76,918. Reimbursement by the State is at 70%

Currently, the Medicaid Program funds one full time Occupational Therapist and provides professional development for related service providers as occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language pathologists and social workers require continuing education units to keep their licenses.

Included in the presentation was the additional CHOICE reimbursement.

2020-2021 Requests to Support Student's Academic and Social and Emotional Needs: Ms. Holian requested a total of eleven (11) FTE paraprofessionals (\$275,000) to continue to keep high need students in district through specialized programs. Many of these students require a one to one or two to one student to teacher ratio. Included in the Superintendent's proposed budget are two (2) paraprofessionals.

Effective School Solutions: Ms. Holian is requesting to retain the two clinicians at Berlin High School (\$270,000) and one additional clinician at McGee (\$100,000). Berlin schools are dealing with a significant increase in students experiencing social and emotional distress. This includes both the general population as well as students receiving services on an IEP or 504 plan. There is an increase in

family, school and social stressors as well as anxiety and depression. Students are lacking effective coping skills due to these stressors. As of tonight, there have been 46 DCF referrals, 22 reports of concern, 23 at risk reports, 2 risk assessments conducted by the district's consulting psychiatrist and 9 psychiatric evaluations. Included in the presentation were the survey results from McGee school counselors, concerning areas students would like support.

Included in the presentation was the mission of ESS; a listing of the clinical services; ESS staffing; a partial list of the high risk student issues ESS has encountered with students in the Berlin public schools; result snapshot for improved student outcomes and key statistics for Berlin High School 2019-2020 for marking period 1; and parent comments.

Dr. Zeuschner is requesting to move to a full-day preschool program. Currently, there are two classrooms that are part-day programs, with each session two and one-half hours and one classroom that has extended hours. Dr. Zeuschner is proposing one BLAST Classroom, which would meet four and one-half days a week and four full-day classrooms that would meet four days a week. Due to transportation, class would run from 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. Dr. Zeuschner is requesting an additional Preschool teacher and additional paraprofessionals.

Although studies on full day preschool have been completed in inner cities, the benefits shown include an increase in language skills, social emotion development, physical health and attendance; a decrease in chronic absenteeism; and an overall increase in achievement.

B. District-wide Non-instructional Programs/Athletics

Director of Athletics Jeff Mauri presented the 2020-2021 Athletics Budget. A copy of his presentation was provided to Board members. Mr. Mauri indicated the major drivers are increases to officials (\$10,315); uniforms (\$33,000); HUDL (\$9,900); cheerleading stipends (\$5,929); and an athletic study stipend (\$5,000). Mr. Mauri reported there are eight teams on the replacement cycle for uniforms.

C. Site and Building

D. Capital Requests

Director of Business Operations Jeffrey Cugno provided Board members with a handout of the Board of Education Budget summary for proposed fiscal year 2020-2021. The projects/expenditures were requested by School Administrators and/or the Town Facility Department and reviewed by the Town's Capital Management Committee. The total of eligible requests made by the School Administrators and Town Departments under the General Fund category is \$4,194,000. Projects/expenditures estimated at less than \$25,000, as well as Information Technology expenditures, were not eligible for consideration under the Capital Plan. Ineligible projects/expenditures are to be requested and proposed in individual operating budgets. The following projects/expenditures will be proposed to the Board of Finance and Town Council for consideration in the 2020-2021 budget: roof top unit at McGee (\$225,000); two school vans (\$110,000); fire alarm upgrades at Hubbard School (\$150,000); school security vehicle (\$10,000); Willard parking lot/loading dock (\$200,000); and Willard HVAC replacement (\$2,500,000).

E. Board of Education Overall Review

Superintendent Benigni clarified his statement from Monday evening when he said 2.3% of the overall increase is to meet contractual obligations. Superintendent Benigni indicated 2.3% relates solely to staffing; however, when you factor in transportation and tuitions, it is around 5% of the overall increase to meet contractual obligations.

Superintendent Benigni indicated the Special Education budget is of great concern at the state level as well as the district level. There is concern the numbers keep rising, and there are legal obligations to provide these services. With regard to athletics, there is some cost savings as freshman sports are not running this year; however, if the freshman sports return next year, the budget may be tighter. Superintendent Benigni realizes and recognizes a 6.4% increase is a large number; however, he believes the district is trying to compensate for past budgets and is returning positions to the district that were eliminated over the past years; new staffing requests are not a major driver. Superintendent Benigni indicated in order to maintain the educational system the citizens of Berlin have become accustomed to, with favorable class sizes and course offerings at the high school that rival other schools, the district needs a budget that will allow for this.

Superintendent Benigni welcomes the Board to scrutinize the budget he has proposed and determine if there can be further reductions while still maintaining an educational system the district can be proud of.

Mr. Aroian indicated the Board will meet again on January 27, 2020. He thanked those in attendance from the Town and the Board of Finance. He asked Board members to send questions to him for forwarding to Superintendent Benigni who will provide answers to all Board members.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

At 8:16 p.m., a motion was made by Mr. Salina, seconded by Mr. Tencza.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 7:0; including President Aroian

Respectfully submitted,

Julia Dennis, Secretary Berlin Board of Education