

## School District's Five-Year Budget Projections Have Lots of Extremely Soft Numbers

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When the Board of Education discussed the five-year "financial projection" for school district spending and revenues on Tuesday, there was some disagreement about whether or not it would be better to reduce some of the guesses about future state aid, and whether or not to anticipate an expansion of the Early Learning Program for preschoolers.

But what everyone discussing the projections appeared to accept (and nearly everyone stated it in one way or another) was that no one knows how much state aid Darien will get, if the town gets any aid at all. And no one knows exactly what kinds of programs or changes to programs that the school district will have in future years.

There are also plenty of other unknowns in the budget: If more teachers retire than usual in any given year, that could lower personnel costs considerably as new teachers hired to replace them would likely be younger and get lower salaries. Personnel costs are about two-thirds of the entire district budget. Also, insurance costs are unknown, even for the next fiscal year. Costs for utilities are unknown, as well.

*See also:*

- [School District Officials 'Predict' Increased Spending, Slight Enrollment Declines in Next 5 Years](#) (Nov. 28)

In fact, so little is known about the future course of the school district budget that one member questioned why the five-year projections were brought before the Board of Education at all.

The response from administrators and former board chairperson Betsy Hagerty-Ross (called the board's "budget guru" by current Chairperson Tara Ochman) was that the board agreed to provide it to the Board of Finance and other town officials, who wanted it in their financial planning. Those town officials wanted the projections before the State of the Town speeches were going to be given to the Representative Town Meeting in December. School district administrators didn't indicate at any point that they use the projections for any planning they do themselves.

Hagerty-Ross also said that the state Excess Cost Grant aid predictions didn't seem to be a bad guess about what Darien might be getting. Much of that money ultimately comes from the federal government, not the state (which doles it out) she said. That would mean that the state's fiscal problems might not affect the aid.

Ochman pointed out that if the Board of Education indicated in a vote that it didn't expect to get state aid (or much of it), that could lead state lawmakers to believe that Darien was accepting the idea that it was acceptable to lower revenues to the town. Ochman said the board should not be sending that signal to decision-makers in Hartford.

Schools Superintendent Dan Brennan and Finance Director Michael Feeney asserted strongly that the numbers in the projection were their best guesses as to what future costs and revenues would be, but they seemed to indicate in the discussion that they really don't know some big parts of the budget.

The most recent state aid figures for special education were above \$2.86 million, which is roughly equal to 2.9 percent of the current fiscal year's \$99.8 million budget. If the town gets no state aid in the future, that would increase the "net budget" by roughly the same percentage. (The net budget takes into account total spending minus total revenues, like state aid, to get the total amount requested from the town's taxpayers).

The school district administration's prediction for state aid is \$2.3 million for this year and \$2.5 million a year for the following four years. Board member Dennis Maroney called that guess "foolhardy" and suggested gradually lower figures over future years, getting the number down to \$500,000 in the last three years of the projection. The board voted that down in an 8-to-1 vote. Board member Christa McNamara proposed slightly higher figures, and the board also voted that down.

McNamara also said she strongly supports the Early Learning Program and hoped to see it expanded, perhaps by two more classrooms, at some point in the next five years. Ochman pointed out that doing so isn't a decision that the board has made, nor did the board have time to look into the matter, since Feeney said town officials wanted to get the budget projection in soon, possibly by Friday.

Brenner said that right now he has no space to expand the Early Learning Program, but that it's possible to expand it at Ox Ridge School after some building program there. If that happens, the new space wouldn't be available for the program until the 2021-2022 school year, he said.

The total estimated percentage increases in the amount the school district would be asking from the town for each of the next five fiscal years are, year by year, 3.21 percent, 3.93 percent, 3.96, 4.10 and 4.15. Those amounts, described in a Nov. 20 memorandum from Feeney, were what the board approved to be sent on to town officials.

If approved by the Board of Finance and Representative Town Meeting, that would force town tax rates to increase, since education spending is about two-thirds of total town government spending.

Board member Jill McCammon said she was unlikely to favor percentage increases that were very high — certainly not increases as high as 5 or 6 percent, which would be the result if the board lowered the estimates for state aid.

The estimates don't restrict the Board of Education from proposing different budget amounts in the future, since Tuesday night's vote by the board was only to pass on the estimate, not to set budget amounts.

Jack Davis, chairman of the Representative Town Meeting's Finance and Budget Committee, spoke to the Board of Education during public comment periods near the start and end of the meeting.

"I'm asking you guys to please consider, asking to cap, what's in the forecasts, because 3 and 4 percent (net budget increases) end up adding fuel to the fire and fodder to your detractors," he said. Davis appeared to be referring to critics who want lower increases in education spending to avoid higher tax increases.

"So it's something that, when you're looking at it, we don't need to start there, even though I know that when the budget comes in it will be closer to 2 percent. So that's something for you to consider, because that's what they're going to be talking about — not the actual budget."

When he spoke at the end of the meeting, he said: "To be honest, I'm extremely disappointed. [...] This was an opportunity for the board to say what percentage you are looking for over the next five years, and 3 and 4 percent isn't going any place — not with everything else. This was an opportunity to say 'I want to be at 2.5 percent,' and if the numbers are showing that it looks possible, what things are we going to do to ask for savings and other programs. [...]"

"I think a 3.9 percent has no bearing on reality, but what it does do is all the people who are looking to attack this board, you've just added them fuel, so I'm extremely disappointed in what went on today."