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## Education 411 Update

**School Committee Meeting Notes Submitted by Kathy Wallace  
January 18, 2007**

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Agenda

- SUPERINTENDENT'S UPDATE
- WHY CLASS SIZE MATTERS
- SCHOOL COMMITTEE AND ADMINISTRATION COMMENTS
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Thank you for joining the Education411 distribution list. We hope that you will find this information to be helpful and we welcome your questions. We want to reach more residents of Westwood and expand our distribution list. Please tell your friends and neighbors about our publications.

Education411 is a grass-roots citizens organization. We hope to facilitate broad based community discussion about the budget. We expect to launch our website shortly, which will include Frequently Asked Questions. We strive to attend School Committee and Finance Commission meetings to provide summaries of the meetings and we are making plans to host a forum on state aid for education on Monday February 26, 2007 at 7PM. Please save the date.

SUPERINTENDENT'S UPDATE

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WESC (Westwood Elementary Schools Coalition) representatives attended the meeting to encourage people to buy tickets for the March 10th event and to consider donating auction items. Last year, WESC donated \$26,700 to each of the 5 elementary schools. The theme this year is a seventies dance party and Disc Jockey Karen Blake from Oldies 103.3 will be there. Chandelier photo shots can be taken upon arrival. A significant portion of the photo sales will go to WESC. There will be a sit down dinner and later in the evening there will be fun photos taken using seventies wigs and props.

On Saturday January 20th, a budget forum took place that included detailed presentations by principals and department heads. These presentations will be available on the website.

There is increased pressure from Special Education costs on school budgets across the state. The Mass Association of School Superintendents has written a position paper. The hope is that there will be new legislation regarding circuit breakers which limit how much

towns have to pay for specific Special Education costs.

The Westwood High School Winter Gala will take place on Friday February 2, 2007 at Moseleys and will be a fundraiser for the PTO and the graduation party. This event is not just for parents of seniors. All High School parents are invited to attend.

**WHY CLASS SIZE MATTERS**

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Dr. Avalin Green, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development

John Antonucci (JA) introduced this presentation by stating that virtually all budget requests are related to addressing class size and he felt it was important to show how education has changed over the years.

The full PowerPoint presentation is on the website.

Federal legislation has changed education dramatically from 40 and even 20 years ago. The legislation requires free and appropriate education for all students in the least restrictive environment. At the state level, the Education Reform Act of 1993 instituted curriculum standards, MCAS testing and graduation requirements. In addition to Math and Language Arts, beginning with this year's freshman class, students must also pass a Science exam in order to graduate. As a result of this legislation, the style of instruction had to change. In the 60s, 70s and 80s, instruction was mostly whole class lectures with one textbook and an exam at the end of the unit or course. In 2007, we now have interactive instruction whole class and small group, flexible groupings, multiple textbooks and supplemental materials and assignments to meet student needs and frequent assessments tied to instruction. Westwood has high class sizes district-wide.

- 23% of all Elementary classes are above School Committee guidelines
- 21% of specialist classes at the Middle School have 40 or more students, including a PE class with 48 students
- At the High School, 30% of all classes have 25 or more students. In 1996, that number was 3.6%.

Dr. Green quoted a WHS teacher who responded as follows to the question, why does class size matter. *With large class size, the kids lose out, there is less effective group work, less participation, fewer student presentations and teachers cannot provide constant feedback.*

SCHOOL COMMITTEE AND ADMINISTRATION COMMENTS

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A SC member asked if we need to look at our elementary school configurations to achieve equity between schools. We are struggling every year with class size and we need to do something differently. JA replied that we have an inefficient system but we are limited by our buildings. We have 5 small elementary schools that are close to home. When they look at alternatives there are no perfect solutions and any

transition would cost money. They could consider K-2 and 3-5 in different buildings or having K on its own in an Early Childhood Center. These changes can be troubling to people and certainly would not be done in this budget cycle as you have to allow for community input. Another consideration is curriculum continuity in all 5 buildings. An advantage would be an easier transition if all grade 5 students went from one building to the Middle School.

A SC member recalled that we went to this K-5 model for better continuity, i.e. fewer transitions for the kids. In Medfield, they have 2 grades in every ES building and everyone is moving on to the same building. John Antonucci replied that we are in the process of a space needs study and we should await those results before considering a change.

A SC member stated that class sizes at the MS and HS can only be addressed by additional funding. A question was raised regarding how the rotating schedule affects class size. The HS only has 800 students which does not allow as much flexibility as a larger student population. The small total size is a good news/bad news thing.

Would ES teachers specializing in subjects help with class size? For example, if the 4th and 5th grade teachers split math and science between them. JA replied that we do that now in some schools but only at one grade level. It does not affect how many people that you need, it only distributes the workload and content expertise. There are benefits of the homeroom nature of ES. Going to a new model would have one time costs and transportation costs could rise dramatically. A statement was made that every bad decision is made because of space and space drives decisions.

Do you have a long range plan? JA: we are awaiting the space needs study to come up with temporary or long-term solutions. We cannot be looking for money every year.

It has never been acceptable to the SC to have singleton classes. JA replied that the 5 ES are inefficient as to class size.

Why did we go to the K-5 model? There were four reasons: education continuity, keeping families tied to a neighborhood school, if you have a problem in a subject area then you more easily know where the problem is and finally transportation costs and timeliness of buses.

**ELEMENTARY MATHEMATICS**

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Dr. Avalin Green, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development

John Antonucci (JA) stated that this was being presented tonight because unlike most budget items that are program restorations or class size related, this request is new. Although it is new, it has been requested in the past 4 budget cycles and not funded.

The full presentation is available on the website.

The 2006 MCAS results in Math demonstrate the need for improvement. In Grade 3, 20% of the students are in the needs improvement category while Grade 4 has 25% NI and Grade 5 has 21% in the NI category. This budget request is for \$200,000 to fund 3.5 Elementary Math specialists and a .5 Math coordinator. This is modeled after the ES Literacy Support Program. Only 16% of kids are in NI in the English Language Arts. In the past, Westwood supported ES Math as follows:

1991-98 One Math Coordinator and 6 Math Teacher Leaders

1998-2004 6 Math Teacher Leaders, the coordinator was eliminated

2001-2 Two Math Lab Teachers (2 schools 8 hours per week)

2004-present No support

2004-2007 10-12 weeks of before/after school instruction for struggling Grade 4 students and as many as 33% of students are referred.

This is merely a band-aid. If students are not meeting standards by Grade 3, then we are already late. Advanced students are given an additional challenge by some technology and classroom materials provided to teachers. Although math is not the strength for most teachers (only 13% of Westwood ES teachers listed math as their greatest strength), there has been limited professional development time on math.

SCHOOL COMMITTEE QUESTIONS

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In 1991-98, what were the results when using the math leaders' model? There is no data to answer that question but the SC member did not recall an improvement.

Is the problem with the curriculum rather than with the teaching model? Westwood uses the Investigations model. There are only 2 models that are well aligned to standards and MCAS and they are both similar so changing the model would not likely lead to better results. The 2007-8 release of Investigations has improved the computation methods.

Over a 3 year period, the average for Grade 4 is 27% as NI and they want to bring that down to 16%.

Can we be sure this is money well spent? We would ask for accountability and a structured review of how things are going. A statement was made that the greatest job growth in the next 10 years is in Math and Science and we owe this to the kids.

Martha Jones has a parent run volunteer math support program. Can this be duplicated at the other ES? The program is running well but it is a Band-Aid. This program resulted out of a parent survey. Why

wouldn't other schools want to do this as well? It continues the move of putting the burden on parent volunteers rather than the town funding education. Teacher surveys were done in 2002 and the teachers were clear that they needed help. It is one thing to talk over strategy during lunch but it is much more valuable to have a math specialist come in to model a lesson in the classroom. The Investigations program promotes a higher level of thinking and not just rote memorization.

Are other districts struggling? Are we hiring the right teachers? Most districts have at least one Math specialist. Wellesley has 2 and Needham has 1 and they both use Investigations.

Will the revised Investigations version be for all grades? Yes, well that is their assumption right now, the prepublications materials just came out.

Are you going to target the 2nd and 3rd grade populations? We can't say how we would do it at this point.

Why not use the math teachers leaders' model? Because those teachers are in their own classroom and they are not available to go and model a lesson. In the past, those teachers received a modest stipend and did workshops before school started in September. They never provided services to struggling students. If you look at errors on tests, it is basic elements that they missed.

A SC member commented that he remained skeptical of the math curriculum, that it is not challenging enough and why do we need specialists to teach basic skills. They as a committee need to decide if this is benefiting a small number of kids, then is it worth \$200,000. Response: Don't focus on the % in categories, there are kids in proficient categories that should be moving on but do not have the building blocks. Then that would suggest that the curriculum is not rigorous enough. The Math specialists would provide support at both ends of the spectrum, not just struggling kids.

Why have we not addressed math in professional development time? When we had a Math coordinator we did have quality professional development.

Are you saying that this is the only way to improve math results? Yes.

**2007-8 BUDGET**

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We are looking for \$3.7 million more than the 2006-7 budget. The town contribution is projected at \$750,000 and we are planning to seek a \$2.9 million override.

SC: Should the SC be looking at what the appropriate override number should be or review the budget item by item to determine validity of the need?

Two years ago, the override request was \$2.4MM and was voted down.

A SC member feels that \$2.9MM is a suitable number. They are not fully restoring programs and they are not completely eliminating fees. They really need to look at each of the budget requests. SC does not want to be seen as rubber stamping the budget.

JA: We need to keep the focus on level services. We need \$1.4MM to maintain inadequate services. If we ask for an override, we need to give the voters something in return. To do an override just for level services is a loser.

SC: We need to make it as tight as possible but we also are advocates for the system.

SC: What needs to happen so the town can contribute \$750,000 to the budget? Either additional state aid, education aid, lottery aid or favorable health insurance premiums.

SC: On a positive note, the funding of education was a major issue during this year's Governors race, so we would hope to see some positive changes in state aid. However, Governor Patrick has told state administrators to reduce their budgets by 10% so we may not see any increase in the near term in Chapter 70 aid.

JA: This is where the lobbyist comes into play. Last year there was a rebellion but we won't have an answer on Chapter 70 aid until after the April 24th override vote. The only variable that impacts the override number is the local contribution.

SC: There may be a few things in this budget that we are better off without. Do we need a \$50,000 MS wellness teacher? Study halls in 7th and 8th grade are not the end of the world. Maybe we wait until we get the Chapter 70 number to decide if we will fund the wellness teacher. We do need to fully fund the HS.

SC: If after the 1/20/07 presentations, that SC has questions, will you come back to us with a revised budget after consulting with the Administrative Council.

JA: If they decide that \$2.9MM is not the right number, he will need time to redo this budget which took 3.5 months to prepare. He would go back and do a new budget. He suggested letting the process run its course so they can hear from the principals how this affects their buildings.

Assistant Superintendent, Ed Kazanjian (EK) commented that there were 22 additional positions requested by principals and department heads that did not make it into the budget. There was an additional \$1.7MM requested so they have already pruned the budget.

JA: One of those requests was an additional assistant principal at the HS (request was denied). Our administrator to student ratio is the worst in the TEC (Education Collaborative includes Canton, Dedham, Dover, Framingham, Holliston, Hopkinton, Medfield, Natick, Needham,

Norwood, Sherborn, Walpole, Wayland, Wellesley and Westwood) but they kept the focus on direct services to kids.

SC: Are you keeping the change in time at the Deerfield? JA: Yes, it did not get back in this budget. We did not want to trade buses for teachers.

EK: We just opened the bids for bus service and they are up significantly, so there will be a need for an adjustment to this budget because of increased transportation costs.

CUSTODIAL CONTRACT

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The school department reached an agreement on a new contract for the custodians. It is not a contract to celebrate because these folks deserve more. They have a increase over 3 years of 1.75%, 2.5% and 2.75%.

**OTHER**

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Barb Delisle announced that she will be running for re-election to SC.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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Q: Has the town indicated how much they will be looking for in the municipal override? A: The town will not go for an override.

Q: Have you taken into account that the fringe benefits for the proposed 36 new hires will put additional strain on the municipal budget ? Have these positions been communicated to the municipal side?

A. Yes, we have communicated the staff increases to the town finance director and they are aware of these positions. Note: the school budget includes salaries and the municipal budget includes the fringe and pension benefits for all school department personnel.

Q. How realistic is the \$750,000 expected town contribution? A. Last year, they were predicting a \$380,000 contribution and it ended up being \$1.2MM They are clearly conservative with their estimates. One SC member stated that the town should be able to contribute the same amount as last year and another SC member stated that the town cannot contribute money that they don't have.

Comment: A FinCom member was in the audience and clarified the sources the town's contribution last year. The \$1,209,000 operating budget contribution came from a number of sources, not all from the town: \$544,000 from Prop 2 ½, \$490,000 from State Aid ( which included \$350,000 in Chapter 70 aid and \$140,000 from additional "one time" state aid), plus \$175,000 from free cash which was put into an energy reserve account. In addition to the \$1.2MM , the town funded \$350,000 for the repair of the MS roof. The FinCom member stated that given the "one time" nature of some of the funds last year, that it is not realistic to expect the town to match last year's contribution.

Comment: I do the practice math sheets with my 4th grader and he fell off the boat last year. There is no consistency. Last year, his teacher was a reading teacher. He is a bright kid, it is not the curriculum. It is the way it is being taught and 3rd grade is a critical year.

Comment: There is no way that parent volunteers can teach math.

Comment: A Boston public school teacher (with kids in 1st and 4th grade in Westwood), who currently teaches the same math program that we are using in Westwood, stated that in Boston each school has a .5 math coach who works with the grade level team and they hope to get everyone up 10 points.

Q: You spoke earlier about the transition from ES to MS needing to be smoother, would it make sense to make the math position full time and responsible for K-12? A: No, the focus needs to be on K-5.

Comment: Give the kids what they need, don't tinker with the number of \$2.9MM versus \$2.3MM for the override. We have failed the class of 2007.

Q: With the new contracts, there are smaller raises in the first year, followed by a higher percentage in the second year. As we look forward to 08-09, how much more will we need to keep level service? A: Yes we look ahead and we really need a 5% annual increase to fund the budget each year. The teacher's contract is the lowest settlement in the region and the difference between 2.5% and 3% is \$90,000.

SC: 2007 class has been successful despite the budget cuts.

Comment: There is a fundamental problem in every town Prop 2 1/2 is inadequate. There is a reason why it is impossible to live within that cap.

Comment: The class of 2007 may have been successful despite the budget cuts but that is because they went through the system before many of these cuts. What about the class of 2020?

Q: Have you calculated what the \$2.9MM override would be on the average house? A. Yes, it is on page 7 of the Executive Summary that is on the website. On a home valued at \$650,000, the increase in property tax would be \$471, for families with children in school, this would be offset somewhat by the proposed decrease in fees.

**UPCOMING MEETINGS**

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- Thursday 2/8/07 School Committee Budget Feedback
- Tuesday 2/13/07 School Budget presented to the Finance Commission
- Thursday 2/15/07 School Committee Budget Hearings

Contact Information

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