

Melrose Public Schools
Superintendent's Budget Message
Fiscal Year 2016

INTRODUCTION

The vision of the Melrose Public Schools is “[to] engage all students in learning, raising the aspirations of all students by embracing them in a learning environment designed to meet the needs of all learners...[to] provide a comprehensive curriculum aligned with state and national standards that challenges and prepares all learners from Pre K to 12 and beyond... [that] consistently integrates best practices to provide a focus that is aligned horizontally and vertically across all grades and addresses the needs of all students... [and which] employs highly-qualified teachers and administrators who engage students in a positive and dynamic manner, are student-focused, and work individually and collaboratively to effectively deliver instruction and assessment and advance student performance in all areas of learning. (*Excerpt: Melrose Public Schools Strategic Plan 2010-2015*).

The school budget is the vehicle by which the School Committee communicates its values and vision for the district, signals its commitment to its mission and our children, and sets its priorities for growth and achievement. Without an adequate and secure budget, the district cannot fully accomplish its goals for student growth and achievement, and therefore, never actualize its vision. Over the past three budgets, the city and district have been able to provide sufficient funding with some small increases to meet contractual obligations and one time funding for purchases. Combined with the reorganization of some programs and the reallocation of existing funds, we have been able to maintain and even make small improvements in curriculum, services, and staffing as well as support a new teachers’ contract whose goal was to make us more competitive. More importantly, this was achieved in an economic environment marked by recession, diminishing state revenues, disappearing federal grants, and endless new mandates. In order to support the school budget, the city has committed the majority of new growth money to the schools, has bonded for curriculum materials, and provided one time funding for costs such as technology training and new athletic teams. The district has made difficult choices that have resulted in underfunding staffing and system-wide technology needs. Additionally, we have raised fees and spent down revolving funds. Parents and community organizations have contributed through fundraising and grants. And lastly, the city has made a yearly transfer in from free cash of \$600,000 in order to fully fund the school budget and meet school funding obligations.

It is the job of the Superintendent to plan an annual budget that will achieve the district’s vision through the identification of system-wide needs and the allocation of available resources, including people, programs, supplies, and facilities. Each year, we have developed a guiding question for the budget process so that we can support thoughtful and responsive teaching, engaged and challenging learning, and continually raise

expectations. In FY13, we asked, “How do we support continuous improvement in teaching and learning so that we have a strong instructional core that benefits all students?” In FY14, our guiding question was, “If our objective is to continuously advance teaching and learning so that we realize higher levels of student performance for all learners, how do we allocate our resources to be most effective?”

For three years, we have been focused on aligning curriculum both horizontally and vertically to improve the depth and consistency of content and instruction across schools and courses, as well as to increase rigor; widen our educators’ repertoire of best practices so that they may support all learners in accessing a standards based curriculum; and develop assessments that provide us with data to gauge our progress in these areas. The progress we have made has been achieved within our limited financial resources and by staff and administrators who have been extraordinarily hardworking and creative. However, we have reached a point in our work that, in order to progress to the next level of growth and achievement, we need to add additional resources both to meet the instructional needs of our students and to support our staff in their work. It is imperative that we continue to focus on improving teaching and learning so that we may deepen our educators’ knowledge and skill and continuously advance high expectations for student growth and achievement for all our children. Our overarching goal is that all students can be successful in an increasingly competitive and global economy. Thus, the guiding question for FY16 is ***“What additional resources do we need as a district so that we can continue to grow and achieve the highly effective school district our students deserve and we desire?”***

DISTRICT BUDGET PRIORITIES

The Strategy Overview for the Melrose Public Schools outlines the objectives and priorities that guide our work. We have focused on improving and increasing our capacity in planning, curriculum and content, instruction, and assessment and data so that we may develop a school system that is constantly improving teaching and learning, and constantly raising achievement outcomes for all students. However, none of this is attained without adequate funding invested in people, programs, resources, and technology. Furthermore, in a society and economy marked by exponential growth in information, rapidly changing technology, and a globally connected world, the district needs to be flexible and adaptable to frequent changes and demands. In order to grow and sustain the school system we desire, we need to engage in an open, frank conversation about school financing and the needs of the district.

As stated above, we have been able to make a number of advancements due to reorganization of departments and programs, reallocations with the school budget, raising fees, and some additional funding. Parent Teacher Organizations, the Melrose Education Foundation, private foundations and organizations have helped to fund technology, professional development, and curriculum materials. In addition, the city bonded \$480,000 for curriculum materials, and provided funds to expand varsity lacrosse and launch girls’ hockey, for upgrades to the accounting system, and for technology training. As a result, we have been able to do the following:

- Reorganize and reallocate funding for the following positions:
 - An additional 1.0 psychologist for the secondary campus
 - 3.0 English as a Second Language teachers
 - 2.6 elementary Academic Interventionists
 - The Director of Visual and Performing Arts.
 - 2.0 Elementary Instructional Coaches.
 - 1.0 Academic Facilitator divided between the high school and middle school.
- Add the following positions:
 - 1.0 fourth grade teacher at the Lincoln School
 - .4 math teacher at Melrose High School.
- Develop a strong, purposeful internal system of horizontal and vertical professional development to provide staff with training in content, instruction, and assessment.
- Align our curriculum with the 2011 Massachusetts Frameworks in English Language Arts and Math.
- Implement new standards and expectations for reading, writing, and math across the district.
- Develop curriculum maps, identify best instructional practices, and write common assessments for all content areas.
- Renegotiate the teachers' contract to be more financially competitive and raise professional expectations.
- Implement the state's new Educator Evaluation System.
- Add more offerings at the high school to support student interests, expand opportunities, and enable 100% of our students to meet the new Mass Core graduation requirements.
- Pilot E-readers and Chrome books at several schools.
- Add girls' hockey, expand boys' and girls' lacrosse, and expand the number of musical and drama performances at the middle school.
- Develop a tiered system of support in order to provide intervention and extension for students K-5.
- Pilot a general education/special education alternative program at the middle school.
- Develop a system wide approach for student support teams to identify struggling students and to provide research based interventions and supports.
- Implement an English Language Learners program at four schools.
- Support educators to become either SEI (Sheltered English Immersion) endorsed or certified as an English as a Second Language teacher, in accordance with new state regulations.
- Purchase new print and digital materials in math, science, global languages, social studies, and English Language Arts.
- Shift responsibility for the buildings and custodians to the Department of Public Works.

- Establish a Special Education Stabilization Fund in the city budget as a contingency fund for unexpected special education costs.

As we undertake the budget process for FY 16, we have a choice to make. A “*status quo plus*” budget for FY16 would enable us to maintain our current level of service plus four positions necessary for next year: an elementary teacher for Winthrop, an elementary teacher for Lincoln, one ESL teacher for the elementary level, and an academic interventionist at the Horace Mann. In a “*growth*” budget, we include the positions needed for 2015-16 and add a number of positions and resources that we believe are instrumental to achieving our vision and goals for the Melrose Public Schools. These resources are divided into the following categories: Direct Instruction and Support to Students; Instructional Support for Staff; Curriculum Resources; Professional Development; Technology and Digital Resources; and the Structural Deficit. We do not view this list as either exhaustive or excessive. Nor can we predict any new mandates that may come from either the state or federal level. We believe this budget proposal will enable us to advance instruction and student outcomes and give us the resources we need to support those efforts. Our overarching goal is to provide our students with the knowledge and skills necessary for college and career readiness. College and career readiness skills extend beyond content knowledge and include, but are not limited to, collaboration and team work, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and imagination, oral and written presentation, research skills, multiple literacies such as technology, finance, media, civic, and information, and global and cultural awareness. Our children will need these skills so that they become adaptable lifelong learners who can navigate the rapid shifts in employment, society, and culture they will encounter in the future.

Direct Instruction and Support to Students

- 3.0 Elementary Teachers: To meet the increase in numbers at the Winthrop and Lincoln Schools over the next two years.
- 2.0 English as Second Language Teachers: To provide our growing population of elementary and secondary English Language Learners with the instruction they need to succeed in our schools.
- 1.0 Academic Interventionist: To replace the loss of the Title I Tutor at Horace Mann due to reductions in federal funding and to continue providing academic support to struggling students in math and ELA.
- 1.5 Library Media Specialists: To enable us to provide instruction and support in the use of multiple literacies including information, media, and technology as well as provide instruction in research and presentation skills, similar to the instruction available at the middle and high schools.
- 1.0 Elementary LICSW (social worker): To help students develop the social-emotional and behavioral skills for developing positive and productive relationships, making good decisions, being resilient, and other personal skills necessary for success in school and the community.
- 2.6 High School Staff: To provide more staff in key shortage areas in fine and performing arts, social studies, and technology/engineering. This restores some of the staffing lost over the years, helps to lower class size in some large classes,

and provides staffing for new academic demands at the high school. All students are now required under Mass Core to take one full year of an arts course and five additional courses beyond the core requirements already required in math, science, English, social studies, physical education/health, and global languages.

- 1.5 Middle School Staff: To provide additional staff in order to ensure all students have access to the full array of electives, such as art, music, and design and engineering and to provide additional supports and enrichment opportunities in math. This would enable more students to participate in these content areas, improve exposure and mastery, and encourage continued study at the high school level.
- 1.0 Elementary Specialist: To provide the additional staffing needed to provide art and music as we add more general education classrooms at two schools. As a community, Melrose is committed to providing our students with opportunities in the fine and performing arts.
- 1.0 Secondary Level Alternative/Special Education Teacher: To provide alternative academic options for students who would like to stay in the Melrose Public Schools, but need a more flexible and nontraditional means to earn a diploma.

Instructional Support for Staff

- 1.0 Elementary Academic Facilitator: To help elementary teachers differentiate and develop strategies and content so that we may challenge and extend academic opportunities for students, similar to the options developed at the secondary level.
- 1.0 Elementary Instructional Coach: To extend into social studies and science the Instructional Coaches' work in developing curriculum and supporting and modeling best instructional practices. This will help staff implement the new framework in science, engineering, and technology to be issued in 2016 and to update our curriculum in response to the social studies/history program review being conducted this year.
- 1.0 Pre K-12 Instructional Technology Specialist: To provide instruction and support to staff so they may effectively incorporate technology and digital content into teaching and learning.
- .3 K-8 Inclusion Facilitator: To provide support to general education and special education staff so that our special education students may receive a standards-based curriculum in the general education classroom and/or the least restrictive environment possible.

Curriculum Resources

- Additional funding required: The bond enabled us to "catch up" on our materials. However, curriculum development is ongoing and, in fact, never ending. We need to fund the budget adequately so that we can purchase materials out of the budget in a thoughtful and systematic manner. We have instituted a continuous cycle of program review that will involve every content area on a rotating basis. The school budget should be able to finance updates in all content areas in response to the review and/or as mandated changes in programs dictate.

Currently, the most pressing need is updated reading instruction resources in K-5. With the new science standards that will be forthcoming in 2016, we will need new materials K-8. And our recent program review for social studies/history has highlighted the out-of-date resources in that content.

Professional Development

- Additional funding required: Changes in curriculum, instruction, assessment, technology, and new mandates require more professional development than in previous years. For example, additional training will be necessary for the implementation of the new science standards including the new science practices; to meet requirements that all teachers be trained in English as a Second Language, Special Education, and Social Emotional Learning; to support staff in developing and administering performance/task based assessment; and in using technology as a learning tool.

Technology and Digital Learning

- Separate technology funding so that the school budget is responsible solely for licenses, subscriptions, and memberships, some of which like ASPEN, our information management system, are required by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- Remove hardware and infrastructure needs from the school budget and create a permanent funding mechanism for city/school hardware and infrastructure needs.

Structural Deficit

- Add sufficient funding to the school budget base, so that the need for a yearly transfer from the Board of Alderman is minimized. This will not result in any additional programs or services for students, but will ensure the funding necessary for existing programs and services.

DISTRICT BUDGET CHALLENGES

We recognize that school and city budgets are vulnerable to a number of variables that can negatively impact the budget with or without these additional resources. When we plan a budget, we are aware of these challenges and account for their impact to the best of our ability and the information available in any given year. At the same time, we cannot fail to act as a district and community because of these possible challenges.

State and Federal Funding: While the Commonwealth is engaged in a review of Chapter 70 funding, the ultimate resolution of this may take several years of study or another legal challenge similar to the one in the early 1990's that resulted in the Education Reform Act of 1993. Among the concerns with Chapter 70 funding are inequities in per pupil allocations between cities, the actual costs of programs, i.e., special education, English as Second Language, and Homeless Students, and the charges incurred for local charter school enrollment. At this time, we cannot expect additional funding and may be subjected to further cuts similar to the 9C cuts recently made to METCO and

Circuit Breaker and/or the reductions in federal grants similar to those we have experienced over the last six years.

Local City Revenues: As a city, Melrose realizes 94% of its tax revenues from residential property taxes. Additional revenue is generated via excise taxes, fees, and commercial property taxes. State aid contributes only 18% to the city's overall funding. As stated earlier, the city has used most of recent increases in revenues to support the school budget.

Health Insurance: Health Insurance has been the largest growing expense in all areas of the economy. In Melrose, we were an early adopter of the GIC (Massachusetts Group Insurance Commission) plan and have since renegotiated the percentage contributed by the city and schools to employee costs. Membership in GIC has enabled the city to achieve some savings. However, this is very much an external cost for which we have little control.

Changes in Enrollment: While the school district's overall numbers remain fairly stable, we are experiencing a shift in our population. First, we have an increase in numbers at the elementary level as evidenced by the need to add additional teachers. Secondly, similar to districts across the state and country, we have a growth in English as a Second Language Students. Our ELL students require both separate services as well as having all core curriculum staff trained in Sheltered English Immersion instruction.

Special Education Circuit Breaker: The yearly reimbursement (circuit breaker) for special education costs above the threshold of \$41,408/student is inconsistent, ranging anywhere from a low of forty percent to a high of seventy-five percent. We calculate circuit breaker conservatively as a safeguard. In addition, the city has established a Special Education Stabilization Fund for extraordinary costs.

Special Education Programs and Services: Changes in special education costs occur two ways. First, while Melrose has been successful in keeping our out-of-district placements to a relatively low percentage of all special education students (7%), the costs of these placements continue to rise yearly. Second, in order to help our students with disabilities stay in district, we need to provide a range of programs that can meet student's individual needs. Some of those programs require a high student to staff ratio and additional related service providers as well as consultants to train the staff.

State and Federal Mandates: Expectations for schools have increased disproportionately in relationship to the number of hours children attend school and the resources available in most cities and towns. While we may argue that we should not respond to unfunded mandates, it is easier said than done when students have unmet needs due to either the lack of services from other state agencies or a family's difficulty in meeting those needs. Among the new mandates is alternative education for suspended or expelled students, suicide prevention training, social emotional education, transition skills training, new requirements for graduation and college and career readiness, and the technology required for online assessment. While we cannot

predict future mandates, we do expect there will be more as schools take on more responsibility for addressing societal concerns.

Anticipated Curriculum Changes: Changes in curriculum and instruction reflect the changes and needs of the larger socio-economic environment. Each year, there is a rising expectation for digital resources and technology as both a teaching and learning tool. As previously mentioned, the Commonwealth will adopt in 2016 a revised science curriculum with new standards and practices incorporating updated science content topics including new standards for engineering, computer science, and technology. The requirement to implement a social-emotional curriculum is also evidence of a larger societal need. Another anticipated change is the long awaited framework for history/social studies, which we expect will include more emphasis on economics, financial literacy, and civics. Furthermore, in all content areas, we find that changes and updates to curriculum are occurring more frequently than in previous years. If we do not maintain a cycle of continual review, updates, and purchases, we can quickly fall behind in a short period of time.

Employee Salary Increases: This year we are renegotiating four contracts: Administrators, Secretaries, Transportation, and Traffic Supervisors. Next year (FY16) is the last year of the educators' contract and we will resume negotiations sometime during the 2015-16 school year. It is important to note that in Massachusetts all educators must have a master's degree within five years of employment. Many schools of education are now adopting a five-year teacher education model where new teachers will graduate with a master's degree. This will raise the average starting salary for any new teachers.

CONCLUSION

As a district and community, we understand and appreciate the importance of education for our children and our society. In Melrose, we are fortunate in that our children come to us ready to learn, from education-rich homes and supportive parents. We believe that all our children deserve the best possible education system the city and district can provide. Our planning, decisions, and work are based in the principles that:

1. All children can learn and grow.
2. All students should have access to equitable resources including instruction, materials, technology, and highly qualified staff.
3. All children should be able to receive the supports, challenges, and extension for learning that they need as individuals and without being classified as a subcategory of the general education population.
4. All children must master the content and skills necessary to succeed in a global society that is characterized by rapid growth and change.
5. Educators are important to the success of our children. Therefore, providing our educators with high quality professional development, a competitive salary, and supports for both them and their families are critical to our overall success.

6. We must provide our staff and students with the resources necessary to deliver challenging, engaging, and current teaching and learning so that they can succeed academically and personally.
7. Technology and digital resources are now fundamental to good teaching and learning and it is our responsibility to fund and maintain an updated and functional system.
8. As individuals and an organization, we want to be engaged in work that is sustainable, as well as responsive and adaptive to the needs of our students and our own professional practice.

The question we continuously ask ourselves is “How do we keep getting better so that we can improve outcomes for all students?”

Accordingly, in support of our ongoing efforts to grow and improve the Melrose Public Schools, the Finance and Facilities Subcommittee of the Melrose School Committee has identified four funding priorities for the budget:

- Program - Ensure access to engaging and challenging curriculum and instruction, for example, through class offerings, curriculum alignment, differentiation of instruction, blended learning, and instructional practices.
- People - Maximize value of teacher contract to recruit, hire, train and retain staff that demonstrate high impact teaching practices and are supported to thrive in a professional learning community.
- Resources - Build and maintain a high quality learning environment including, but not limited to, staff, materials, technology, and facilities.
- Reserves and Contingency - Allow flexibility to address unexpected and hard to predict resource allocation due to the changing needs of the political, economic and educational environment.

The FY 16 budget is an opportunity for the community to have a robust discussion regarding education in the 21st century, to articulate its vision for the Melrose Public Schools, and to set priorities and goals for achieving that vision. We will be presenting the complete FY16 budget on Tuesday, February 24, 2015. Between February and April, we will hold a series of budget meetings during which we will provide the context for our budget and the priorities laid out in this budget message. We look forward to providing the community with further explanation regarding the importance and impact of our budget proposal.