

Listening Tour Report 2017



**Report to the Board of Education and Community
on the Results of the 2017 Listening Tours**

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Executive Summary

On February 1, 2017, the Superintendent recommended a 2.49% budget for the 2017 – 2018 school year and presented it to the Board of Education. The development of the annual budget is an inclusive process that gathers input from a wide range of stakeholders including students, staff, parents, internal and external advisory groups, and members of the community. This budget has been carefully aligned to our long-range strategic plan ([NPS2025](#)) and designed to promote the district mission and vision as well as the priorities set by our Board of Education in 2015. While the current budget request is currently 2.62% over the current year's adopted budget, it reflects significant reductions to the recommendations made by the various stakeholder groups in an attempt to offset required contractual increases and other associated necessary costs that have been deferred in previous years.

It is imperative that the long range strategic direction and short range action plans are closely aligned to the pulse of the entire community and their expectations. There have been opinions expressed publically that the community can no longer afford to maintain support for the public schools at current levels. The annual budget requests for the past five years have been lower than any in the last four decades and although the final allocation has been closer to the request, there have still been significant cuts year after year that have had a significant impact on the ability to compete with the 29 new magnet schools in the Hartford area.

Listening Tour Format and Information

Budget documents were posted on the district website well in advance of the start of the tour. This enabled parents and members of the community ample time to review the information in advance and prepare questions. In addition, each participant was provided with handouts detailing the most recent information. The 2017 – 2018 budget information can be accessed by clicking on the links below or on our [website](#).

2017 - 2018 Budget Information

- [BOE Budget 2017-2018](#)
- [Budget-At-A-Glance 2017-2018](#)
- [Citizens Guide to the Budget 2017-2018](#)
- [Narrated Budget Video 2017 - 2018](#)

The budget summary information was shared with parents and community members. Since the format was more of a discussion than a presentation, parents were able to ask questions and share feedback throughout the evening. The building principal took notes so the questions could be documented, answered and provided as a resource for other members of the community who might have the same question. It was extremely evident that participants were well prepared as evidenced by the wide range of outstanding questions. Some participants had questions about our business model, strategic and operations plans, and our method of calculating return on investment. Some participants expressed a concern about the sidewalk safety during the recent snowstorms. The majority of the

participants had many questions that emerged into four overarching themes: Budget and Finance; Programs and Curriculum; Technology and Infrastructure; and Facilities (Infrastructure and Maintenance).

Overarching Themes

1. **Budget, Infrastructure & Maintenance**
2. **Programming / Curriculum / Technology**
3. **Early Childhood / World Language**
4. **Concern about property values by new residents who relocated because of the schools**

Notes/Feedback from Families

- Several questions came up regarding students that came to Newington over the summer (12) that require special education and the cost associated with special services, outplacement, etc.
- Questions were posed regarding where the financial responsibility falls for students attending magnet schools.
- A few questions came up regarding the decision to move away from the accreditation process.
- A question came up regarding how the psych. service allocation was determined.
- A few questions came up regarding the busses/bus garage.
- There was discussion regarding the developing the preschool program, possibility using the St. Mary's building.
- A question/concern came up regarding the number of social workers, namely at the middle level.
- A question came up regarding the 1-1 program (third grade and up).
- A discussion was held regarding the use of Correctional Enterprises.
- A question came up regarding the next steps/presentation to town council.

In this section we will provide a summary of participant feedback in each of the four areas followed by answers to some specific questions asked by parents throughout the tour. Since many participants had the same or similar questions, we combined them and listed the question only once whenever possible. While we may have been able to document every question asked, we are confident we were able to capture most of them.

1. Budget, Infrastructure & Maintenance

Summary:

Participants were appreciative of the transparency of this year's budget information and had many outstanding questions specific to items in the budget. The general consensus was that while nobody ever likes to see taxes increase, it was likely unavoidable if we want to maintain the current level of services. Magnet schools continue to be point of confusion for parents and staff alike and the money we spend on students attending such schools. There's a rising concern about class sizes throughout the district, especially with respect to budget cuts.

Questions / Comments:

? What do you mean by unfunded mandates and how do they impact the school district?

Let me give you an example. There is a requirement that all schools have two certified instructors in the pool. That means at least one must be Lifeguard certified and the other Wellness certified which means we no longer use our swimming pool for Wellness classes as we would have to increase staffing.

? How does magnet school tuition work? Do we still pay if the student moves back to the district or another district?

We must pay for any Newington student who is attending a magnet school on October 1st regardless of whether they return to district a few weeks later.

? Any talk of four classrooms for Ruth Chaffee's 2nd grade? Our 1st grade classrooms are at 23 students each. Is this reflected in the budget?

We lost positions which increased our class sizes. It's uncertain if we will be able to address it. It is not currently reflected in the budget.

? Do we have students attending schools in Newington that do not live here?

Yes we do. These students fall into one of five categories:

- a. Open Choice (Hartford) – We currently enroll approximately 100 students from Hartford through the open choice program. The State pays Newington \$4,000 per open choice student to cover all educational costs.
- b. Tuition – There are some families who do not live in Newington but choose to enroll their children in our school and pay the full annual tuition (Approximately \$16,000).

- c. Court/Agency Placed – There are several students who have been placed in our schools by the courts or other State agencies. The State of Connecticut pays the full annual tuition (Approximately \$16,000).
- d. Homeless – The McKinney-Vento Act prevents districts from withdrawing students who can be considered homeless. The numerous motels on the Berlin Turnpike are an example of this provision. While some of our students do reside in these motels on a more permanent basis, even those who stay only one night are entitled to educational services in Newington if they become homeless.
- e. Residency Violator – Each year our Director of Security and Residency discovers several students who do not fit into one of the above categories. Our district uses software that regularly crosschecks information and highlights irregularities in patterns and activities. These irregularities sometimes prompt an investigation which may lead to the discovery of a residency violator. Residency violators are given a due process hearing and a final determination with regard to the reason of the violation. Residency violators are given the option to pay tuition, move to Newington, or withdraw from the district. Significant savings are achieved each year by investigating and enforcing residency requirements.

? With the reduction to 4.21%, what will be cut? I'm worried about what we will lose.

There are two things - \$150,000 for a chiller and two vacuum cleaners.

? I don't see the 0.5 ELL position, is this correct?

We have just completed an audit by DMC to review programs, identify improvement areas and how we can work efficiently based on the data collected. That gave us information about ELL support and needs.

? Thoughts about the bus that is on the able as a reduction; is it a wheel chair bus?

Interestingly, one of our handicap accessible buses just blew an engine so no, it will not be a wheel chair bus, it would be a full size bus that may be purchased through the town's CIP account.

? Perhaps book fairs can offset some of our textbook purchases?

Our school district should pay for the basic needs of the students and teachers. As such, textbooks should be paid for by Board of Education money, not fundraising.

2. Programming / Curriculum / Technology

Summary:

Parents had many great questions about our curriculum and how the academy programs worked and were very pleased with and overwhelmingly supportive of the progressive direction of the district. Parents were thrilled with the direction the district is moving in regarding World Language on the core, but of course concerns were about what was being lost in its place. The new social studies curriculum had some parents concerned as well as the transition from textbooks to online instruction.

Questions / Comments:

? **Is your vision for STEM on track?**

Yes, we are moving forward with the current plan to offer pathways at the high school level which will allow the opportunity for students to take a course in a specific area to explore their interest without having to be in an academy or students who know what they want can work with Mark Danaher, Academy Counselor, to plan an Academy Pathway in Medical Sciences, Culinary and Hospitality, IT and Digital Innovation, or Finance and Business.

? **Social studies is changing and my 6th grader is upset they won't have the opportunity to learn about ancient Greece and Egypt.**

We have newly adopted Social Studies standards and all middle level curriculums are being adjusted. Grade 5 – Early Settlers to the American Revolution; Grade 6 – Eastern World Regions and Cultures; Grade 7 – Western World Regions and Cultures; and Grade 8 – the Constitution to the Civil War. At the high school level students have requirements – US History and American Government. They will have opportunity to take social studies electives.

? **Do we have a High School Exchange Program? Can it be considered in the future?**

No, we currently don't. It's usually connected with the World Language department, which is working hard to increase rigor so students are proficient in a second language. Yes, we can look into it.

? **If the request for Grade 7 Spanish on the Core class does NOT happen, then what? Do we keep it on the special cycle if it doesn't get approved?**

That is still up for discussion. It has been a major drive for the Board. We are not doing our kids justice. We are fighting like crazy to keep it there. It is currently offered on the 8th grade core.

? **When are we looking at proposing and/or actually having a preschool within Chaffee's district?**

We would need to put an addition onto Chaffee if we chose to add preschool. Our town IT department will be housed in the location at Chaffee. We are discussing the best way to do a consolidated preschool – leaning more towards a consolidated preschool within town.

? **Is there a possibility of ½ day weekly for professional learning?**

Right now it is a wish. It has not been discussed. Please do not get your information from Facebook.

? **How can students get into the academies?**

There is a lottery system. They are only open to students in Newington.

? **How many children are in these academy programs?**

There are 50 children at each school, 25 in each grade 7 and grade 8. Our curriculum for our Aerospace Academy is very rigorous and is a model for other districts.

? Social Studies Textbooks: Who makes them? Scholastic, perhaps?

We will begin to write our own textbooks eventually, but we will be purchasing hardcover books, this time.

? Which grades are the social studies textbooks for?

K-12

? When will the social studies curriculum be written?

It's presently being written – Will roll out in the fall of 2016.

? What will grade 7 lose with World Language on the core?

The Encore schedule will be impacted.

3. Early Childhood / World Language

Summary:

Parents, in general, seem to be thrilled with the Chrome Books and the district's 1:1 device plan. Questions still arise, however, about the Chrome Books and what summer means for them. There continue to be frustrations with the ease of navigation using the district website.

Questions / Comments:

? In regards to the 1:1 devices, have you thought of a roll-out plan at the high school?

Unlike the elementary level, at the high school courses are not grade specific so a 9th grader may be in classes with 10th or 11th graders so if everyone doesn't have the device the teacher can't require students to use one. I am requesting funding for technology through CIP.

? The district website is so very hard to navigate. Is it possible to streamline so it can be easier especially if we want to move to a digital format? It's too difficult to find staff; some staff has the same last name. Can we have email addresses instead of the form? When searching for the lunch menu, you get a request to complete an application. Is it possible to have a mobile app?

We were conservative about the cost so some of it may be due to the system. I will have it looked at to see what we can change.

? Will the students keep the Chrome Books over the summer?

Yes, that is the plan. We are leaning towards letting them keep it for the summer. Why would we stop that? Moving into Schoology – piloting that now in several classrooms.

? If we don't have Chrome Books for grade 9, will grade 3 need to get Chrome Books?

No, we can recycle grade 9 to grade 3.

? **There was a question about the insurance money for the Chrome Books.**

We will continue to collect some sort of deposit for the Chrome Books. Students will be able to keep the same Chrome Book they've been using. Most likely, students will be able to keep Chrome Books over the summer.

? **Do we block internet sites such as games or Facebook?**

Our filters monitor and block access to information and sites on the World Wide Web as required by the [Child Internet Protection Act](#). We focus on teaching students *digital citizenship*, therefore, access and instruction around social media sites is not prohibited. Some games are blocked due to content, but we do teach Advanced Programming, Gaming Development, and Mobile App Development courses at Newington High School, so we are careful to balance our restrictions as to allow students to learn the necessary skills required in the curriculum.

4. Property Values

Summary:

It was surprising how much misinformation was out there regarding the way the Capital Improvement Projects program operates and how it relates to the annual budget. Participants were genuinely concerned about making sure we maintain our facilities and infrastructure. Much of the concern appeared to stem from the town hall renovation project issues. Residents were worried about how the town was going to catch up on years of deferred maintenance that now seems to be negatively affecting the ability to attract new families to Newington.

Questions / Comments:

? **Question/concern was brought up about the mold or mildew smell that evident earlier in the year at Anna Reynolds.**


Our maintenance department has done an amazing job maintaining our school, but the fact remains that the school is very old and needs much attention.

? **Is it cheaper to rebuild the school entirely?**

A rebuild might be the solution. This will be explored later.

General Comments and Suggestions

 Parents would like to see smaller class sizes.

 I am thrilled with the vision for Newington Public Schools! My sons are benefitting greatly and our teachers are excellent.

 The need for social workers at middle schools.

- 🏠 Thank you for the great programs. Not many school districts can do what you are doing. My son loves the Aerospace Academy.
- 🏠 You have set great long term goals and expectations for our district; thank you!
- 🏠 My two years in the Newington Public Schools has been positive. I have been impressed with the progress my daughter has made.
- 🏠 I'm concerned about the space we have at Anna Reynolds and our class sizes.
- 🏠 The heating and air conditioning in the schools is inconsistent.
- 🏠 I am very excited that Grades 7 and 8 will have World Language on the core. This will help students with retention of the language.

Priorities

i	Summary of Conversations With Participants
	<p><i>Parents were very eager to share their feedback and were very open and honest about some of their concerns. It was very clear that the quality and reputation of the schools was the primary reason many of our parents chose Newington as their home. While parents were understandably concerned about tax increases, they seemed to be more concerned about the negative impact on property values that would occur if the quality and reputation of the schools declined.</i></p> <p><i>While parents were generally very happy with the schools, there were three areas in which parents expressed disappointment in our lack of progress. At each of the learning tour stops, parents were very vocal about moving forward with the following three things.</i></p>

Parents Top Priorities for Moving Forward in the Very Near Future

Priority	Comments
Class Sizes	This was the hot button issue for many parents. Mainly an elementary school issue, it seems as though parents from all four elementary schools have the same concerns about class sizes and overcrowding. With budget cuts, parents are fearful that class sizes will continue to increase.
Early Childhood Options	This too was a major concern for parents. Many parents are seriously considering sending their three and four year old children to magnet schools because we currently do not have universal preschool. Parents were honest by saying that once children are comfortable in a school they would be very reluctant to move them. They fully support and strongly recommend the district move forward quickly with increasing access to preschool in our schools.
Deferred Maintenance	Parents were also very concerned about the deferred maintenance issues in town and were very vocal about not having another "Town Hall" emergency. There were many questions about the reasons for not funding at the very least the priority 1 maintenance issues in our schools.

2017 – 2018 Budget Timeline Progression

Budget Process Timeline	
Superintendent's Recommended Budget	Wednesday, February 1, 2017
Board Budget Program Review	Tuesday, February 7, 2017
Board of Education Budget Review	Wednesday, February 8, 2017
Board of Education Budget Adoption	Wednesday, February 15, 2017
Board Presents to Council	Monday, March 6, 2018
Town Council Sets Tentative Budget	Thursday, March 14, 2017
Public Hearing	Tuesday, April 4, 2017
Town Council Sets Budget	Tentative: Tuesday, April 18, 2017
BOE Budget Adjustments	Wednesday, April 19, 2017