



**Board of Education Open Topics Forum March 21, 2017
Administration and Board Responses to Questions Posed by Community Members**

Curriculum

Q. What is the status of the reading curriculum – Teachers College vs. Writing Revolution?

A. The District is committed to continuing with the Teachers College model. However, we believe that Writing Revolution will provide a valuable supplement. We are currently completing Writing Revolution training for general education and special education teachers at the secondary level. Five Middle School teachers (two special education and three general education) and four High School teachers (three special education, one general education/Department Chair) have attended the training in addition to an administrator from each of the schools.

Additional Writing Revolution training will take place over the summer. As Dr. Monahan pointed out in his initial presentation, Writing Revolution will provide some help to all students and a great deal of help to some students who struggle with writing.

Budget

Q. Can the District add an additional budget meeting on March 28 for the community to get more information on the budget?

A. At this point that is not possible. Because of notice requirements of the Open Meetings Law, except in the case of emergencies, substantial lead time is necessary. Calling an additional meeting also requires assuring that a quorum of the Board can be present and the necessary administrators can be present. Suggestions for additional meetings can be made to the Board, but setting them up at the last minute is difficult. Additional budget discussion meetings are something the Board will consider for the next budget cycle.

Q. How can the general public ask questions about the budget?

A. The Rye community is encouraged to come and ask questions about the budget during any of the Board of Education meetings leading up to the Budget Vote (May 16 this year). There is a time set aside at each Board meeting for members of the public to come to the podium to ask questions or make comments. If they prefer not to speak at a Board meeting, community members can always direct questions to the Board through the Board email address: rcsdboard@ryeschools.org. Any questions posed that way will be presented during the “Communications to the Board” section of the next public Board of Education meeting. Members of the public may also email the superintendent at monahan.brian@ryeschools.org or call him at 914-967-6100, ext. 6271.

Q. Why isn't the District seeking an override this year?

A. The District did not seek an override for several reasons:

1. Because allowable tax levy growth was slightly higher this year. The tax cap law allows growth at a rate of 2% or the rate of inflation (CPI), whichever is less. CPI for the 2016 calendar year was 1.26% which, while still allowing for only modest growth, is substantially higher than the year before (.12%);
2. Additionally, school districts' required contribution rate to the Teachers' Retirement System (TRS) declined somewhat; and
3. The community's support of the May 2015 override budget helped to bring school tax revenues into closer alignment with operating expenses. In 2017-18, the plan is to use reserve funds to ensure the ability to cover unexpected expenses, rather than to fund the regular educational program of the schools.

Q. Why is the District using reserves to fund the budget?

A. Per State Education Law, school districts are not permitted to deficit spend (operate “in the red”). Therefore, the budget summary contains a line item called “Maximum Use of Fund Balance.” The figure for the 2017-18 school year is \$2.1 million, down from \$2.3 million for the year 2016-17. That amount will be moved out of the District's Undesignated Reserve Fund into the budget to be used for extraordinary items. For example, should we have an unusually long winter, expenses for heating and custodial time for snow removal may be higher than budgeted. Having the reserve funds in the budget covers such contingencies. The intent is to return as much of that \$2.1 million to reserves at the end of the school year, with the goal of keeping the level of reserve funds stable.

Q. How does funding of the elementary schools work? Are the monies allocated equally?

A. Funds are allocated equitably on a per pupil basis. The calculation for each school is based on the projected enrollment for the coming year.

Q. The budget calls for additional staffing for enrollment growth but the budget decks and other budget presentation materials show anticipated enrollment as flat for 2017-18. How accurate is the District's demographic information at predicting enrollment?

A. While the District uses the services of a professional demographer, over the years those projections have failed to account for the unpredictable inward migration that occurs over the summer months. In addition, high class registration numbers often cause the need for additional sections of classes at the Middle School and High School.

The two staffing additions (FTEs, or Full Time Equivalent) in the budget will allow additional class sections at the elementary level, if necessary, based on enrollment changes between the budget preparation process taking place now and the beginning of the school year. Two FTEs will likely be used to address growth in the student population that has already occurred at the secondary level.

Given the level of financial stability of the District brought about by the override, it's possible to appropriately budget for the seemingly inevitable enrollment growth that takes place over the summer as people move to Rye.

The budget presentation decks, available online, were presented at Board meetings during the annual budget cycle. They are not meant to be comprehensive treatments of the topic. Rather, they are a guide to assist the speaker and the audience. Naturally, during the course of presentation and discussion, additional information is shared by the presenter as illustration or in response to questions. If you have additional questions, please feel free to reach out directly to the presenter.

Q. Can you please add more historical information to the budget in the major categories - technology, facilities, etc.?

A. WinCap, the District's current financial management software, dates back to the 2013/14 school year. Budget codes are refined annually during the budget process to ensure alignment with required state reporting (funds are moved accordingly) and expenses are categorized in the most accurate and specific way. Both of these factors make for a more accurate budget, but cause year-to-year comparisons to budgets built prior to the use of WinCap to be less useful than one would think.

Q. The utility tax is non-deductible. Can the District move this into the normal budget?

A. Rye does not have a significant commercial tax base. The vast majority of school taxes are therefore borne by residential taxpayers. A utility tax is a relatively small tax (3%) shared among all types of utility users in the City of Rye including businesses, renters, and condo owners. The City of Rye also collects a (non-deductible) utility tax and has for many years.

School districts in New York have very limited opportunities to raise revenues particularly in light of the tax cap. The utility tax was established in 2014 to ensure a small, but steady, stream of revenue help close the gap that had existed between revenues and expenditures. While not deductible, one benefit of the utility tax is that the tax burden is spread across a wider base of taxpayers.

Student Experience

Q. Can you add more Academic Intervention Services (AIS) at Milton School?

A. Support teachers are provided to schools based on the needs of individual students. Student needs are assessed by a variety of measures, including scores on State tests. For example, if a student receives a score on a State test that falls below the proficiency level, the state requires schools to offer AIS. Additionally, AIS is recommended based upon in-classroom assessments and teacher observations. Support teachers are staffed at the various schools based on the numbers of students who qualify for AIS.

Q. Can we change to a 6-day specials schedule at the elementary schools so the holidays don't impact the specials? Holidays frequently fall on Mondays and impact the schedule.

A. The District will be studying the elementary school schedule and plan on working with a scheduling consultant during the 2017-18 school year.

Q. What does the District do to support the social/emotional learning at the schools, and what is the budget? What is the status of the Rye Youth Council advocates in the schools?

A. The budget to support social emotional learning resides in a variety of categories within the budget because it takes many forms: salaries for psychologists and social workers, the Rye Youth Council for the Rye Youth Advocate at the secondary level, SEL (Social Emotional Learning) programs, such as The Caring Community and The Responsive Classroom, and the purchasing of a variety of books for classrooms and libraries around the concepts of SEL. In addition, we are partnering through PNW BOCES with the Yale Center for Social Emotional Learning for the Middle School and High School next year. There is currently a Rye Youth Council Middle School advocate in place.

Faculty

Q. According to Negotiations Clearinghouse data, Rye's teacher compensation was, at one time, within the bottom quartile of Westchester/Putnam/Rockland county teacher salaries. Does this affect the District's ability to recruit and retain teachers? What is the Board's strategy for teacher compensation and recruiting?

A. Teacher salaries in the Rye City School District have become more competitive since the spring of 2015 when that analysis was done. When we compare our current salary schedule (from 2016-17) to this year's data from the BOCES Negotiations Clearinghouse, we find that the salaries in the Rye City School District have moved into the second quartile in most categories, and have even moved above the median in many categories. This indicates we are making progress.

The work that the teachers in Rye do is highly valued. Compensation is negotiated and part of the District's contract with the teachers. The recently negotiated contract that was accepted by the Board and the RTA includes salary increases for all teachers. The District is committed to providing fair compensation to teachers (and all employees) within the limits of approved budgets. The District recruits both internally and externally when positions need to be filled. Based on education and experience, new hires are placed on the salary schedule. Thus far, the administration reports that Rye continues to be a sought-after destination for teachers.

Q. How are teachers evaluated?

Teachers are evaluated using an Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR). APPR plans are mandated by New York State, are negotiated by the District and the Teachers' union, and then must be approved by the State Education Department. Evaluations are based upon in-classroom observations by supervisors and student growth performance measures. Beginning last year and through 2019, grade 3-8 State tests are not allowed to be used in teacher evaluation. Results on the grades 4 & 8 science assessments, Regents exams, and third party assessments on the approved State list may be used. Based on changes at the State level, the process is in a state of flux.

Q. How is teacher compensation budgeted?

The District must operate within the tax cap, including when negotiating contracts with the five bargaining units of the School District. Prior to instituting WinCap financial management software, the District operated on a salary estimate calculated by multiplying the number of teachers in the District by \$100,000, the amount considered to be the average teacher salary. However, with WinCap, the District is able to be far more exact in its calculations, and therefore budgeting is done based on actual employees' salaries rather than on estimates.

Q. Is teacher compensation limited in order to preserve reserve funds?

A. Compensation for teacher and other bargaining units, including the RTA (Rye Teachers' Association), TATA (Teacher Aides and Teaching Assistants), SCSNCA (Secretarial, Clerical, School Nurse and Computer Aides, RAA (Rye Administrators' Association), Custodial Unit (custodians and cleaners) and M&C (Non-Represented Employees), is driven by the need to live within the tax cap.

Q. How do District salaries correlate with test scores/rankings?

A. The District pays attention to test scores and to rankings. One has to ask, "Which scores and which rankings?" Trying to directly tie test scores and rankings to salaries would be subjective and would not be a measure of the outcomes we seek for our students.

Q. It is difficult to keep good substitutes and special education substitutes in our substitute pool. Is low pay an issue? How do we pay vs. other districts?

A. A review in 2016 of the District's per diem substitute rate found it to be very much in line with the rate paid by the District's neighboring districts and peer districts. School districts throughout Westchester County face the challenge of finding enough substitutes.

Q. Would it be possible to increase the number teacher aides and teaching assistants? Are they hard to retain? Is the budget line item for this flat?

A. School districts throughout Westchester County face a challenge in finding teacher aides and teaching assistants. They can be a challenge to hire and retain because they are very much in demand.

The budget line item for teacher aides and teaching assistants is based on enrollment and student need. The budget for aides and assistants in General Education is calculated on the basis of the number of students in sections (classes) and the number of sections in the elementary schools. In the case of Special Education (elementary and secondary), the number of aides and assistants is determined on the basis of individual students' IEPs (Individualized Education Programs).

The budget for teacher aides and assistants is established in February when the Business Office is creating the Superintendent's Recommended Budget for the coming school year. The line items are calculated based on a projection resulting from the current year. Changes in enrollment in both Special Education and General Education populations between February and

September result in budget changes. So while the budget line items may appear to be flat or static, they will likely not remain so.

Q. There is no Library Clerk at Milton and one shared clerk for Osborn and Midland. The MS/HS Media Center is a very busy place with many students visiting every period, and we could really use another librarian. Are there any plans in the works for this?

A. Next year's budget includes funds to better supervise the large number of students that use the Media Center; we will be adding an additional supervisor there.

Q. The MS/HS Media Center is very tight on space. Often, there are no seats available for students who wish to work there. Are there any plans to modify/expand the space?

A. The District recognizes that the Media Center (Library) is a popular place for students to congregate. Continued enrollment growth has led to noticeable space constraints. In response to this question, the Facilities Department has identified a little-used audio visual storage room in the Media Center, adjacent to the Middle School, that will be converted over the summer into additional space for HS and MS students to use.

Q. Many teachers have morale problems. There needs to be a stronger culture of teacher appreciation. We need a mentor program and more teacher appreciation. How are we currently recognizing teachers?

A. There is a mentor program for new teachers. It could be expanded if there is a level of interest in doing so.

The question of morale depends on with whom you speak. Many, many teachers have very positive feelings about their work in the RCSD. Students are generally highly motivated, and there are many visible results that show that teachers are making a difference. Parents appreciate what the teachers do, and students do, too. PTOs and POs often coordinate teacher appreciation efforts on behalf of the parents in the individual schools. The District works to coordinate positive articles in District and local media about the good work the faculty is doing.

As the Superintendent pointed out at a recent Board meeting, Rye is a rare place in that most secondary students say, "Thank you" as they leave class daily. As administrators and Board members go about their daily routines, they make an effort to commend the faculty for the work they do.

We can always do better, but the Superintendent has reported that he has heard many positive comments from faculty about how things are going this year.

Q. How are we preparing teachers to be leave replacements?

A. Teachers hired as leave replacements go through the same process as our probationary and tenured teachers. In their first year, they are assigned a mentor and participate in all the same professional development as our probationary and tenured teachers.

Communications

Q. We get regular emails from the City about their board meetings? Why can't the District do this?

A. The District is currently re-designing its website. The new website will be much more user-friendly; and we believe it will have many new channels and capabilities for outbound communications, including the kinds of communications distributed by the City Council around meetings. The new website is due to launch in the fall of 2017.

Testing

Q. The January deck is not reflective of any testing analysis. Will the District do more analysis on what could be done to improve test scores?

A. One of the slides does state that the District analyzed test and assessment data. Although the specific findings weren't included in the slides, the teachers and principals reviewed their own school's data and used the specific information to inform their instruction.

The District has held some additional parent meetings this year to discuss testing and test scores.

Technology

Q. What is the timeline for replacement for equipment like SMART Boards, SMART TVs, iPads, Chromebooks and replacement apps?

The District is currently in year 2 of a 5-year District-wide technology plan created and executed in conjunction with the District's technology consultants, EduTek. The plan includes a 5 year replacement cycle program for all the District's devices to ensure technology remains relevant and is replaced prior to the end of life. Software applications (apps) are reviewed by the curriculum department, the technology department and the individual building administrator(s) and are replaced on an as-needed basis as long they align with the curriculum.

Q. Are there any plans for Distance learning opportunities for HS students?

A. Issues of distance learning are being explored for certain circumstances. Those discussions are in early stages in most cases.

Physical Plant

Q. Osborn School parents and teachers complain that there are no fans in some parts of the building and it is too warm to concentrate. The PTO has looked at the cost for ceiling fans. What is being done to fix this?

A. They are right. Parts of the building are very warm during the summer “shoulder” months of May, June and September. Estimates of the costs of installing fans have been gathered. The cost of the fans is not a problem; the cost of the installation is a problem. At this point, the situation cannot be changed much without a significant commitment of resources and dollars. Osborn is not the only school that gets very warm at certain times.

Q. The Midland School “We Future Cycle” program was a huge success. Are there any plans to make this a District initiative? What is the District’s recycling plan?

A. The District continues to implement as many facets of the “We Future Cycle” throughout the District that logistical constraints will allow.

The District’s current recycling plan (aside from Midland) consists of trash and two streams of recycling: paper/cardboard and commingled which consists of plastic, glass and metal.

Q. Some of the radiators in the HS are too hot – a student even hurt himself/herself on one this year and had to go home. Can covers be purchased/built to cover them?

A. The facilities department recently installed several additional thermostatic control valves on radiators as a means to control runaway heat, as well as reduce the amount of time the radiators are hot, while still satisfying space temperatures.

The cost to install custom wood covers on radiators in classroom 208 recently cost \$9,500. There are cast iron radiators all over the building, so the cost to cover them all would be in the hundreds of thousands.

Q. Is the Rye TV Studio going away?

A. The Rye TV Studio is a valued space the RCSD shares with the City of Rye. The District needs to relocate the small control room to within the editing room in order to make the adjacent Middle School nurse's office ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant.