

## **2017-18 School Year Budget**

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **1. Why is there such a sharp increase in transportation costs?**

The current contract for transportation expires in June this year. In securing a new contract, the district did everything possible to ensure a competitive price environment. Only one vendor responded to the bid solicitation and the initial contract demonstrated a 21 percent increase in transportation costs.

Following the initial bid, the transportation vendor was able to identify a less expensive parking option for the buses. Reduced parking costs, coupled with ongoing negotiations, resulted in a final net increase of 17 percent. We have worked closely with the vendor to negotiate the best possible contract for Newton students and residents and we are pleased with the final outcome.

#### **2. Can we use some of the money we are spending on new school buildings to fund staff positions?**

When developing a school budget, funds available are classified into categories. Two of the largest categories are “capital” and “operational.” The funds utilized to build our new school buildings are designated as “capital.” The source of these funds is municipal bonds authorized through the debt-exclusion overrides passed in 2013, as well as state funds coming through the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) process. Like a mortgage, the funds are borrowed for buildings and cannot be used for operational purposes such as staff positions.

#### **3. Would it help if we limited the number of students attending Newton schools from outside Newton?**

Newton does not participate in the School Choice program. The only students who attend Newton Public Schools but do not live in the district are students enrolled in the METCO program and children of staff members. NPS receives state funding to support METCO students, both through Chapter 70 aid and the METCO grant program. The METCO grant provides \$2.5 million in funds for three purposes: METCO staff, teaching staff, and transportation. METCO staff serve not only METCO students, but also resident students in our schools.

Most importantly, our participation in the METCO program has brought families together and built bridges across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines. It has brought deeper racial and cultural understanding to our students, staff, and the entire Newton community and prepared our students to succeed in a diverse global community. As a founding member celebrating 50 years of partnership this year, we value METCO for the enrichment it brings to our students' school experience.

Children of NPS employees may attend Newton Public Schools by longstanding contractual agreement with the Newton Teachers Association. This is a common benefit offered in numerous towns and cities across the Commonwealth and helps us to attract the best faculty and staff. Students of staff do add to Newton's final enrollment count, which is used to calculate Chapter 70 aid from the state. Therefore, Newton receives funding from the state to support students of staff in addition to METCO students.

#### **4. What are Chapter 70 funds?**

The Chapter 70 program provides state aid to public school districts. The state uses a formula to calculate this aid and takes into consideration the actual enrollment of the district. Because METCO students and students of staff are enrolled in Newton, their enrollment factors into the state's calculation of aid to the City.

#### **5. In a city like Newton, isn't there plenty of money to fund our public schools?**

Newton is very fortunate to have strong support for our public schools. Families and community members work hard to support our schools and provide students with terrific opportunities. However, Newton is bound by Proposition 2 ½, a state law that governs property taxes, which are the largest source of funding for public education in Newton and in the state.

Passed in 1980, Prop. 2 ½ was designed to control property tax increases at the local level. By law, the City of Newton can only increase overall property taxes by 2 ½ percent each year. If expenses exceed revenues, the City must find additional revenue sources or cut expenses rather than increase taxes.

Raising property taxes beyond the 2 ½ percent limit requires a majority of voters to approve an "override" through a city-wide ballot question. There are two types of overrides – a "debt-exclusion" override (typically used to fund bonds for building projects and capital expenses) and an "operational" override, which funds operational expenses. In 2013, Newton voters approved both debt-exclusion and operational overrides to fund school buildings and city services.

#### **6. Are we losing all of our school library staff?**

Fortunately, we are not losing all of our library staff. In our initial budget, we identified areas in which we would be unable to maintain level services, most notably library staff. With the cost-savings generated by the health holiday\* and the lower-cost bus parking, we were able to partially restore program areas we thought we would need to reduce more significantly. Of particular note:

- Library services have been fully restored at the middle school level.
- Elementary service will be reduced, but with the recent restoration, we will continue to offer a robust program in our elementary schools.

- Pending completion of scheduling, we may be able to restore additional library and teaching staff in our high schools.

*\*A "health holiday" occurs when the reserve fund for the City's health insurance reaches a certain level. Monies typically spent on health care (for a specific time period – two weeks in this case) can be spent in other areas.*

#### **7. Will we lose Latin completely for our middle-schoolers?**

The decisions made in this budget process were extraordinarily difficult. After a thorough review of all options, as well as an evaluation of the current middle school Latin program, we made the decision to discontinue the program at the middle school level. We know this is disappointing to the students and families who are or were anticipating participating in the program. We feel fortunate that students will still have access to a robust language program in our middle schools and can choose from many different options. In addition, Latin will continue to be offered at both high schools.

We are working closely with our partners at Newton Community Education to offer Latin to those middle school students interested in continuing this piece of their academic program. We will provide more information when it is available.

#### **8. What about the loss of administrators at the elementary level?**

In evaluating our options for creating a balanced budget, we reviewed administrative, faculty, and staff positions, as well as programmatic and operational costs. We are in the process of resolving our staffing issues for next year and there are some challenges related to the assistant principal positions in the district. We hope to have everything resolved shortly.

#### **9. Can we raise money to fund the positions that could not be funded in this year's budget?**

To promote equity and fairness in the district, as well as to be fiscally responsible, the School Committee adopted a policy that prohibits fundraising by PTOs or gifts from individuals to support staff positions. Such a practice creates instability in the system as fundraising can vary from year to year. It can also create inequities between schools as some schools have more fundraising ability than others. Therefore, the policy in place prohibits fundraising for staff positions.