



BOARD OF EDUCATION Columbia, Connecticut

The Columbia School District is a community of learners providing rigorous programs to ensure that each student can excel as an individual.

Michael Maziarz, Chair
Stephania Dawiczuk
Lauren Haberman
Leah Osborn
Rachel Riendeau
Christine Sposito, Vice Chair/Secretary
Paul Zator
Barbara Wilson, Superintendent
Scott Leslie, Interim Asst Superintendent

BOARD OF EDUCATION DRAFT MEETING MINUTES April 1, 2024

PRESENT: Chairman Michael Maziarz, Rachel Riendeau, Leah Osborn, Christine Sposito - Vice Chair/Secry, Paul Zator, Stephania Dawiczuk

ABSENT: Lauren Haberman

OTHERS PRESENT:

Barbara Wilson - Superintendent, Kara Levenduski - Principal, Scott Leslie - Interim Assistant Superintendent, Beverly Ciurylo - Finance Director

I. Call to Order

Chairman Michael Maziarz called the meeting to order at 7:33 p.m.

II. Pledge of Allegiance

III. Comments from the Audience *(Please identify yourself by providing your name and address)*

Time allotted for public participation is twenty (20) minutes; time allotted for an individual speaker is three (3) minutes. Please identify yourself by providing your name and address. For public comments during the meeting, please stand and speak at the center. During this portion it is the role of the board to listen, allow voice to members of the audience, and make notes. We will then use that information together with any additional gathered information to appropriately respond at a later time. We now open up for Audience of Citizens.

IV. Action Items (Consent)

A consent agenda is presented by the Chairperson at the beginning of a meeting. Items may be removed from the consent agenda on the request of any one member. Items not removed may be adopted by general consent without debate. Removed items may be taken up either immediately after the consent agenda or placed later on the agenda at the discretion of the assembly.

A. Approval of Regular Minutes of [3/4/2024](#)

Chairman Michael Maziarz **MOVED**, and Rachel Riendeau **SECONDED**, to move Item A, Approval of Regular Minutes of 3/4/2024, to Discussion and Possible Action as a new Item D. **MOTION CARRIES 6:0.**

B. Approval of Subcommittee Minutes of [3/4/2024](#)

C. Payment of Bills & Expenditure Report

Rachel Riendeau **MOVED**, and Paul Zator **SECONDED**, to approve Action Items B and C. **MOTION CARRIES 5:0:1.**

V. Discussion and Possible Action

A. First Reading Equitable Identification of Gifted and Talented Students [6008](#)

Superintendent Barbara Wilson stated that Connecticut state law requires the identification of students who are gifted and talented. She further expressed that identification is required but services for such are not required in the state of Connecticut.

Rachel Riendeau mentioned that many states require specific, mandated services for those identified as gifted/talented. Superintendent Barbara Wilson expressed that Columbia adopted a whole-school enrichment program.

Christine Sposito stated that the school used to employ a separate gifted and talented teacher and that, if they are considering identifying these students, perhaps they should begin tracking the percentage. She would like to know the percentage of students identified as gifted/talented and their participation rate in the school-wide enrichment opportunities.

Paul Zator inquired about the supposed non-gifted and talented kids, stating that all kids are somehow gifted and talented, that some possess a natural sparkle, and that the quiet kids also have gifts and talents. Superintendent Barbara Wilson shared that the teachers develop deep connections with their students and discover what they are fascinated about and ways to enhance their interests.

Paul Zator stated that he would not want any child to be excluded from the gifted and talented process, and Superintendent Barbara Wilson expressed that having a whole-school approach prevents this from occurring.

Christine Sposito disclosed that whether students require special education or opportunities to explore and express their gifts and talents, they all have needs that must be met, and having a qualification process indicates that kids are not disregarded.

Leah Osborn inquired as to whether there are assessments for identifying gifted and talented students, and Superintendent Barbara Wilson confirmed along with other criteria, the district uses the school-wide standardized group assessment, which is currently i-ready.

Paul Zator inquired as to why the creative arts are specified, as he would consider a gifted and talented student as one with extraordinary learning ability. And Superintendent Barbara Wilson shared that “gifted” refers to academic skill and “talented” refers to fine arts skill, such as music and artistic talent. She expressed that students identified as talented are identified by the specific teachers who teach those particular subject areas and they have specific criteria.

B. Continued Discussion Tuitioning Fees [\(Policy 3009\)](#)

Superintendent Barbara Wilson mentioned that, during the subcommittee meeting, they discussed the topic of families with students who desire to tuition in, which currently costs approximately \$20,000. The Board discussed whether to reduce this amount for families or keep it at the current per pupil rate. The Board directed Superintendent Wilson to share the per pupil rate minus transportation costs.

Rachel Riendeau stated that, during the subcommittee budget meeting, she discovered that they are recalculating the per-pupil rate; therefore, she is curious as to how it aligns and whether it has been at \$20,000 historically. And Beverly Ciurylo shared that it will continue to increase, depending on the number of students, and that if the number of students decreases, the interest rate will increase.

Chairman Michael Maziarz mentioned that it makes sense to want to register kids for school in the town in which a family is building a home; however, he is concerned about policy as it is difficult to change policy based on one individual and, at this point, they are at a financial loss.

C. Discussion and Possible Action - Budget Updates (if needed) Superintendent Barbara Wilson shared that, at the FiPAC meeting on 3/27/24, FiPAC asked the Board of Education to reduce the budget by \$450,000. The Board’s proposed budget had an increase of \$790,000, which is a 5.1% increase to the town. Reducing \$450,000 from the \$790,000 is a 65% reduction in the sought-after increase, and would bring the 5.1% increase to well below 2%. Prior to bringing the 5.1% increase to FiPAC, significant reductions had already been made.

Rachel Riendeau inquired as to what percentage of the \$790,000 was fixed, and Superintendent Barbara Wilson stated that salaries, benefits, and purchased services accounted for all but 19%. Superintendent Barbara Wilson furthered that the 19% "other" is not discretionary line items and includes needed supplies and consumables. Nothing extra (i.e., nothing additional from last year's budget) was being requested..

Rachel Riendeau mentioned that FiPAC requested a 65% decrease. Superintendent Barbara Wilson shared that, even if they were to ask parents to contribute some toward extracurricular activities, the amount collected would only be a small fraction of \$450,000, potentially 5% or \$25,000.

Rachel Riendeau mentioned having a kid that participates in several different activities and that Bolton High School requests \$75 per season per family, with drama included. She also shared that, for sports, they require pay-to-play for grades 5 through 12, at a cost of \$75 per season; however, there is a cap per family, but the fee quickly accumulates when kids are involved in multiple activities.

Superintendent Barbara Wilson and Assistant Superintendent Scott Leslie shared that many positions would need to be eliminated to reduce the budget by \$450,000.

Christine Sposito expressed that they can cut something; however, she is uncertain as to what to eliminate. Chairman Michael Maziarz stated that he is in favor of adults who are in front of kids and that not offering field trips or assemblies will make parents unhappy. He further expressed that there has to be an understanding that there might be some increase. He shared that they haven't increased anything, yet they were told to cut from nothing and reduce it. He also stated that he will not make the reduction as they have no increase of any kind. He inquired as to how they can be expected to cut by \$450,000 when they experience an increase in enrollment every year.

Stephania Dawczyk mentioned that she compared all towns against Columbia, concluding that the taxes and mill rates are higher in all other towns. She stated that the taxes in all other towns are increasing and that Columbia taxes should have increased last year but did not. Unfortunately because of this, this year's increase may be considerable..

Christine Sposito expressed an understanding of FiPAC's need to maintain a lower mill rate; however, eventually the time arrives when there are insufficient funds to continue extinguishing the fires as they have entered a time when things have become expensive.

Stephania Dawczyk shared she is cognizant of Columbia's older population and those living on fixed incomes. However, Columbia is still a desirable town with a mill rate that is still better than most surrounding towns.

The Board inquired about the impact of specific positions if they were cut. Rachel Riendeau asked about world languages and decreasing physical education to once per week. Leah Osborn stated that physical education, Spanish, and the previously discussed math position would bring the budget in the ballpark of \$200,000. Interim Assistant Superintendent Scott Leslie mentioned that it is currently at \$193,000 after eliminating unemployment, stating that one position already budgeted for is \$222,732, and math, Spanish, and part-time PE add a total savings of \$193,482.

Paul Zator inquired about changes to class time if they did not have those teachers. Superintendent Barbara Wilson stated that specials are utilized for teachers' planning time and that Principal Kara Levenduski must be able to find the contracted planning time for all teachers.

Superintendent Barbara Wilson mentioned that Principal Kara Levenduski believes she has found a way to tweak the schedule to get the desired instructional times for academics. If cuts are to occur, Ms. Levenuski will be reworking the schedule again.

Chairman Michael Maziarz asked if he was missing anything that may be excess in this budget. Leah Osborn stated that she believes it is a good idea to revisit what they did not cut and inform FiPAC that they do not support eliminating anything else.

Chairman Michael Maziarz expressed that if they want them to cut more, there will be no assemblies or field trips for kids as well as no supplies and that they would need to start donations to budget supplies. He also shared that these items are not inconsequential and that it is normal to take field trips in elementary school. He further expressed that the students are taking field trips to the Old State House and various other educational and meaningful places.

Rachel Riendeau shared that, last year, they eliminated the \$200,000 because they added it back in due to hiring the security officer.

Christine Sposito stated that their quote to the Board stated, "Not only did they not cut, but they spent more." And Rachel Riendeau expressed that they cut, but they didn't cut what FiPAC wanted them to eliminate.

Christine Sposito added that they then included a safety officer to keep the students safe, but they didn't exceed the limit; they just didn't provide FiPAC with what they wanted. And Chairman Michael Maziarz stated that the previous budget passed, which indicates that the Town is in favor of the budget they presented.

Christine Sposito expressed that she does not want to appear unsympathetic to tax increases; however, they merely need to be able to maintain a high quality education in order for the students to excel, which includes opportunities throughout the day to increase mental health—which is possible via physical education—to have an opportunity to expand on abilities, and to be comparable to students nationwide, which includes world language in early childhood and continued access to math curriculum in middle school.

Chairman Michael Maziarz stated that the point to emphasize is to acquire this dollar amount as they will be eliminating teachers and staff who are in front of kids, and they will have to try to find a place to send the students.

Rachel Riendeau expressed that, after just having discussed the need for enrichment programs, they are eliminating them. She added that world language is an enrichment at that age.

D. Approval of Regular Meeting Minutes of [3/4/2024](#)

Chairman Michael Maziarz amended the Regular Meeting Minutes of 3/4/2024, "Columbia Board of Education Member Remarks", stating that "He absolutely would not lose sleep; the 5% increase to the draft budget maintains what is currently in place and includes zero additions to the previous year's budgeted items."

Rachel Riendeau **MOVED**, and Christine Sposito **SECONDED**, to approve the 3/4/2024 Regular Meeting Minutes with the amendment made by Chairman Michael Maziarz. **MOTION CARRIES 6:0.**

VI. Correspondence/Communication

Superintendent Barbara Wilson stated that, regarding enrollment, two students have withdrawn from the school as they moved out of state.

VIII. Board of Education Upcoming Meetings

- A. Wednesday, April 3, 2024, 7:00 PM FiPAC Special Meeting - BOE and BOS Budget Presentations
- B. Wednesday, April 24, 2024, 7:00 PM Public Hearing & FiPAC Special Meeting to Follow
- C. Monday, May 6, 2024, 6:30 PM BOE Subcommittee Meetings, Teaching & Learning, Budget
- D. Monday, May 6, 2024, 7:30 PM - BOE Regular Meeting H.W. Porter Cafetorium

E. Tuesday, May 14, 2024, 7:00 PM -Annual Town Budget Meeting

Superintendent Barbara Wilson mentioned that the meeting dates are tentative, based on FiPAC's potentially requesting to reschedule them to either April or May.

VII. Reports of Subcommittees ([Subcommittee Meetings](#))

- A. Communications
- B. Teaching and Learning
- C. Policy
- D. Budget

IX. Superintendent's Report

- A. Superintendent's Update

Superintendent Barbara Wilson mentioned that she only has been working on the budget and that there are no legislative updates. They discussed the high school interest survey for all Porter families and requested that they respond to them in either May or June. She shared that, regarding the Invention Convention, a Board member requested access to a rubric and the ability to display the inventions, and she informed them that she will work on establishing them for next year. She shared that Principal Kara Levenduski requested to meet with the PTO wherein everyone was aligned with similar desires with PTO events and plans, and the entire PTO came with them to discuss different fundraisers, which resulted in a very productive meeting. She expressed that the PTO is considering purchasing some equipment but needs to meet certain safety standards and that the PTO and the school solidified and became more collaborative. She also mentioned that regarding HVAC, Bob Manning, from Silver Petrucelli & Associates, would travel to Porter on Tuesday, April 2, to look inside the ceiling for spaces wherein wire can be run.

Leah Osborn mentioned that they are focused on who will foresee and manage the project, whether it will be general contractors, project managers, or construction managers, stating that it appears as if they have some plans and know who will manage the project and do what they are supposed to do. And Superintendent Barbara Wilson added that the project is moving forward. She mentioned that they had second trimester academic honors announced and stated that she is excited for the Friday and Saturday performances of Newsies. She also shared that they currently have 29 kindergarten students registered and that they typically end up with 10 more. Ms. Tremblay continues to see strep throat cases in the nurse's office. She concluded that two Porter students were accepted to nationals: Olivia Molitoris, a grade 8 clarinet player, and Melissa Groves, a grade 8 flute player.

X. Comments for the Audience (Please identify yourself by providing your name and address)

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XI. Columbia Board of Education Member Remarks

Rachel Riendeau expressed gratitude to all who who were involved in creating and presenting the budget, stating that she was unable to attend the meeting but appreciates all the effort involved in it as well as the negotiations. She mentioned being slightly disappointed about the requested increase.

Leah Osborn thanked everyone for working on the budget.

Christine Sposito expressed gratitude to the Board members, stating that she is very grateful for their camaraderie and for the extremely respectful way in which they communicate their ideas. She also mentioned their highly respectful demeanor toward one another, stating that they even disagree respectfully, and that she appreciates being a part of the Board.

Stephania Dawiczuk mentioned that she has learned a lot more during the past few weeks, stating that everything is working out with more collaboration, for which she is grateful. She expressed that they all are there for the right reasons—for the children—and that she appreciates everyone's work.

Chairman Michael Maziarz congratulated all the scholars, mentioning that he had seen their names in the newsletter. He also expressed congratulations to the Newsies cast and to the students who were accepted to regionals. He thanked the HVAC team, stating that it involves a tremendous amount of work, and he expressed gratitude to those who worked on the budget. He mentioned that they have not ever concluded that they should collaborate in regard to spending as much as possible and that they knew they would have an increase this year, with no increase in staff members, and now they are being asked to eliminate them. He added that it isn't what he desires and that he would like to present it to the Town for a vote. He reiterated that they want to retain people in front of the kids, that they love the staff and the teachers, and that their kids love them as well. He further expressed that, when education is done well, the Town benefits from it. He believes that many staff members and administrators are going above and beyond; therefore, they will continue to fight and make decisions pertaining to what is best for the kids.

XII. Adjournment

Rachel Riendeau **MOVED**, and Leah Osborn **SECONDED**, to adjourn the meeting at 8:32 p.m. **MOTION CARRIES 6:0.**

Respectfully submitted,
Michele Cooke
Board Clerk