



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

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Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

FY25 Budget Saturday Meeting Agenda

February 10, 2024 8:15 a.m.

Administration Building Auditorium To view only: <https://www.youtube.com/actontv1>

APPROVED MINUTES

Members Present: Tori Campbell, Liz Fowlks, Lakshmi Kaja, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Leela Ramachandran, Yanxin Schmidt (absent from 10:30 am to 1:45 pm), Andrew Schwartz

Members Absent: Ben Bloomenthal, Vikram Parikh, Rebeccah Wilson

Others: Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Sheri Matthews, Andrew Shen, Members of the Acton and Boxborough Selectboards and Finance Committees, ABRSD staff & administrators, citizens

8:15-8:30 **Arrival and Coffee**

8:30-8:45 **Call to Order/ Welcome and Introductions** - *Adam Klein, Peter Light*
The ABRSC was called to order at 8:30 am by Chairperson Adam Klein.

Members of the public were invited to watch the meeting online via Acton tv's youtube channel. Adam stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website at actontv.org. Acton TV was thanked for spending the day filming the meeting. The Acton and Boxborough Selectboard and Finance Committee members were also thanked for being in attendance. Everyone was wished a Happy Lunar New Year!

Ten minutes would be allowed for School Committee questions and answers followed by 5 minutes for board members and guests to speak during the presentations.

Adam began the presentations by offering the following considerations:

- It takes considerable resources to educate 5,000+ students with above state average outcomes and below average expenditures per student.
- There is a disparity between our highest performers and our lowest and we must do better to serve all.
- Our two communities are some of the highest taxed in the state. We must be considerate of our ability to fund all that our community expects.

It is the School Committee's challenge and responsibility to consider and balance all of this.

8:45-9:30 **Budget Overview**

Peter Light, Sheri Matthews, Andrew Shen

Mr. Light reviewed the budget schedule and important dates leading up to an override ballot vote at the Acton Annual Town Election on April 30, and votes at the Town Meetings in Acton (May 6) and Boxborough (May 13).

1. Superintendent's Overview

- *What is the vision we have for the school experience at AB?*
- 2. Financial Overview
 - Revenues
 - Reserves
 - Expense Analysis
 - Assessment Projections A&B Budgets
- 3. Personnel Summary
 - History since Regionalization

9:30-9:45

Questions/ Discussion

Questions and answers from the School Committee included:

- What is the historical trend for the District's increased spending over the past 10 years? Enrollment has been decreasing and positions have been added. It would be helpful to know how many positions have been added as well as cut. A: This will be considered. The DESE website only goes back three years. When full regionalization (K-12) started the numbers changed so it is difficult to compare before that point.
- The community comparison slide is interesting considering Andover is facing an override next year and Newton just had a failed one. Without our successful union negotiations AB could be in a worse position.
- Our educators have been filling the gaps created by previous cuts as well as the pandemic, every day. The increased needs and challenges in our student population, changes in demographics, and more should not be lost on anyone in our community. They are doing more with less every day. This was a very serious issue especially for our special education population and youngest learners when things went online during covid.
- When new programs and materials are added, when do we reevaluate what we already have? The District has to "live within their means". A: The district pays attention to this and consistently comes in at or around a 3% budget increase over the years. When things are added, trade offs are often made. In the current year, EL educators were needed so when reductions were made, they were added. The MTSS model is another example. Coming out of the pandemic this was one of our greatest gaps and without tiered support, special education is the only option for support. This was gradually incorporated by reducing classroom assistants' hours. Our major drivers for cost are health insurance and special education, which are fixed costs that the district cannot avoid.

(It was noted that the Acton Finance Committee was called to order at 8:32 am.)

Comments from the Boards and the Public included:

- The inflation slide is understated if you look at it on a cumulative basis.
- Strategic decisions were made over the years to keep kids in district. It would be helpful to know how much was saved. Mr. Light looked at Belmont (roughly same size as AB with similar constraints) whose special ed costs are \$22M. AB's out of district costs are \$7.5M compared to Belmont's \$13M because Belmont does not have the same in district programming that AB does.
- Regarding COLA, what would the average cost per FTE increase be from FY24 to 25? COLA is part of that, but what else? A: On average it may be 5% although it includes special ed staff we included this year, as well as the substitute budget increase and reduction in our vacancy factor. With an average FTE cost increase of 5% each year, the persistent challenge is the constraint of Prop 2 ½ and the levy limit. An overall District FTE count for would be helpful.

- This is a bigger issue for Boxborough because they have a 15.9% increase. Discussion of future increases is very relevant. An override in Boxborough is being considered for next year.
- Assessment Projections Slide 18 - why is the B Budget 1.73%? A: This was the maximum number that would not require an override in Acton or Boxborough.
- A Boxborough resident, who is also a Committee member, stated that Boxborough School Committee and leadership members need to have these budget discussions earlier in the year. Early input is important.
- "There is no formula for hard things." Prop 2 ½ came in 1980 and 2 ½% was picked arbitrarily. A board member advocated for dealing with how things are now and how to fund the schools.
- Inflation at 5% is a big deal, but for years when it was near zero, the cost of education was still going up 5% year after year. Looking at the last 10 years is needed to be accurate. An accurate number of employees needs to be provided compared to last year that reflects those added and the value from them.
- How do the added staff impact class sizes? There was a discussion about how this affects learning and special education services. Mr. Light commented that the addition of special educators and EL educators, does not significantly increase or decrease class size. Special ed is a service delivery model where staff comes into a classroom and sometimes students are pulled out but the children are in their classroom for most of the day, with the exception of some in outside programs.
- How does the change in High School leveling affect class size and the resulting number of teachers/staff? Mr. Light sees leveling as class size neutral, other than as teachers try to make the change between homogeneous and heterogeneous, there's a learning curve for staff. More levels result in more variability in class size with more classes on the high and low ends. Good instruction requires reasonable class sizes.
- Circuit breaker reimbursement limits have not changed and the amounts other towns can charge us have gone up. The District will get up to 75% of costs back in a year or two, so we will receive a much larger reimbursement from circuit breaker. If this funding will come back to us, we should not make a permanent change in the taxes and budgets. Mr. Light replied that this was partially accurate. The district will receive more in circuit breaker but it will never be fully proportionate to what we have spent because tuitions have already gone up the following year. Sheri Matthews agreed, adding that special education needs and costs change every year based on the students so our number fluctuates.
- A board member appreciated the level funded budget slide. Some people in the community remember the past overrides when the vote was between level funding and not. It must be made clear that these proposals are between one set of cuts vs another set of cuts.
- A Selectboard member and assistant teacher thanked the Administration for "reclaiming the narrative of fiscal responsibility". The District has not been wildly spending. Also, most Acton residents are not on a fixed income, many are but not most. Small class sizes are a new idea, not an old one.
- On the slide showing reductions over the last 2 years of 40 staff, 36 class assistants were also cut. It would be helpful to show how many people were cut, not just FTEs and what the impact has been.
- The district should be proud of the value they have provided to the community over time. Regarding the reserve position, the Committee could not have anticipated what happened with HIT or special ed tuitions, however the School Committee made a conscious decision regarding emergency funds. Over the last several years, this dragged down E&D. As the Committee considers the

management of FY25, they should focus on the net use of reserves at the end of FY25.

- Amanda Bailey, co-chair of ABSEPAC, asked if the district is meeting the minimum number of recommended hours for English learners. Mary Ann Young replied that AB is not. Service time at the Junior High and High School is being met, but at the elementary level, it is not. Elementary students get 45 minutes at least, and beginners receive closer to 60 minutes. Amanda added that the workload is totally disrupted when a child is in crisis or need in the classroom.

9:45-10:30

Special Education

Jennifer Truslow, Director of Special Education

1. Program Overview
 - Cost-benefit Analysis
2. Proposed Changes in Staffing
3. Out of District (OOD) Costs
4. Transportation Services
5. A&B Implications

10:30-10:45

Questions/ Discussion

Questions and comments from the School Committee included:

- Special Education costs are driven by state laws and are not optional. The District decides how to provide the services.
- Our preschool program is experiencing young children coming from Early Intervention programs with significantly more needs. Director Joe Gibowicz commented that some are much more medically and developmentally complex. These services are costly.
- How will the personnel cuts affect caseloads and meeting legal requirements? After looking broadly across all caseloads and groupings, Jen Truslow expects to be able to meet the needs. Because one kindergarten section can be eliminated, one special ed position can be saved. Another special program doesn't have enough enrollment so that will be reduced.
- Do we do the basic minimum for these students, or do we go beyond in services? Decisions around what services children get are part of the team process and very individualized based on the disability. Educators use data to know if progress is being made on goals. Team and family work together. There is no ranking in the state around IEP service. MCAS data shows our students with IEPs are disproportionately underserved compared to other students. We also have a complex system of assessments in our district to monitor progress.
- Many students came back after the pandemic with significant dysregulation, those with special needs and those without. AB continues to see a small but significant increase in students that need assistance with self-regulation. There has also been an increase in mental health needs. Cartwheel has been very helpful for families who need services.

When asked if the Pathways elementary program has been fully staffed this year, Jen Truslow said not fully but they have used agency staff to fill needed positions. Pathways will be expanding to the High School and there will be additional needs for this unique program. Chronic absenteeism is another issue statewide and nationally. Our trend continues to rise and it has become an acute concern. Mental health issues cannot be understated and have to be addressed as a top priority next year, despite the budget cuts.

10:45-11:00 **Break**

11:00-11:45 **Administration & Instructional Leadership**

Peter Light, Superintendent; Andrew Shen, Deputy Superintendent

1. Roles & Responsibilities of Leadership
 - CO Functions
 - Principals
 - Assistant Principals
 - Special Education Coordinators
 - Department Leaders
 - Curriculum Coordinators
 - Coaches
2. Organization of Leadership in A&B Budgets

11:45-12:00 **Questions/ Discussion**

Comments and questions from the Committee included:

- Regarding the difference between a service mandate and a profit mandate in a corporation and a school district, in a corporate model so much is driven by profit and loss. When revenue goes down, reductions are made. The fundamental challenge in an education model is that the students being served operate independently from the funding.
- When asked how the High School Associate Principals (APs) handle the high ratios of students they are responsible for, Principal Dean replied that with caseloads of 400 students, teams of counselors work with the APs.
- The elementary and secondary mental health and psychology coordinators are invaluable. Susan Root and Heather Stouch spoke about their job responsibilities. Student safety and crisis response is a big part of it. They all have direct service caseloads as well. Differences between a counselor and a psychologist were discussed. At the High School level a lot of work is done on post high school transitions.
- The Assistant Principals' roles are sometimes misunderstood. When a student unexpectedly leaves the building or is in crisis it is often the Assistant Principal's responsibility to respond immediately. Students need to be open to learning and they cannot if they are dysregulated.

Instructional leadership has been the highest priority of the three areas according to Mr. Light. Principals have some of the hardest jobs in the world. Providing the support they need in their buildings has been AB's priority. If building leadership isn't there in a sound structure, all of teaching and learning is impacted. Building leadership provides the environment that allows teachers to do the work they need to do with kids. This drives every decision about resource allocation in our schools.

Andrew Shen was thanked for going beyond the budget numbers to provide a fuller picture of AB's leadership structure. Mental health is a bigger issue than ever. Former School Committee member Diane Baum spoke about the critical importance of "systemwide guardrails to safeguard best practices". Strong instructional leadership is essential for success. She noted, "This is a have to have, not a nice to have."

12:00-1:00 **Lunch & Educator Panel - "The changing role of an educator"**

Teachers were thanked for their extraordinary efforts every day and for using "Universal Design for Learning" to engage students in their learning. They spoke about tiered

learning to support all children. Several teachers stated that they need the support of access to time to collaborate and communicate with other teachers.

1:00-1:30 **Potential Structural Changes for Large-Scale Cost Reductions**

Peter Light, Superintendent

1. Health Insurance
2. School Closure
3. Transportation
4. Open Enrollment

1:30-1:45 **Questions/ Discussion**

Mr. Light explained that the focus will be on things that the District can control although they also have to deal with things that cannot be.

Structural Changes / Budgetary Strategies (slide 80)

1. Strategies for Items Being Pursued:
 - Use of Reserves - long term proposed solution (once E&D is removed from the budget, it will not recur.)
 - Health Insurance - School Committee to withdraw from HIT and operate as an independent political organization due to the GIC. This is the District's focus.
 - Transportation Savings -reducing by 4 buses would save a small amount
2. Other Strategies for Consideration:
 - School Start Times & Elementary Transportation - Substantial effort and research backed 2018 decision to start High School later, better for students
 - Open Enrollment (In-district Elementary Choice) - many considerations
 - School Closure - Reasons to support closure and concerns regarding closure were discussed.

Reserves uses and health insurance trust are two structural changes that can be done to address next year. The other possibilities would buy time. The community has challenged the School Committee to deliberate them and show that they are starting the work to address the structural issues that may take awhile to show results and would be for the long term. A Finance Committee member advocated for "moving on these items". The makeup of the Health Insurance Trust group was discussed.

2:00-3:00 **Open Questions & Answers about the Line Item Budget**

Adam invited members of the public followed by the Boards to ask questions or comment about structural changes or the line item budget:

- Students requiring special needs services do not have a choice about which elementary school they attend because not all services are provided in all of our schools. For that equity reason, please stop talking about "school choice".
- Regarding Conant's structural integrity issues, Blanchard is not in the same state. While all of our schools have issues, Blanchard's roof is not as urgent as previously thought. Paving however is needed.
- Re net use of reserves, this is based on the will to rebuild E&D. The Committee will need to ask about use during the year or to rebuild reserves. A serious discussion was encouraged about rebuilding reserves. The success in rebuilding Community Ed's and Food Services' reserves was noted.

- Re athletic revolving account, some cost variances vary significantly, for example the athletic event staff line. Mr. Light explained that the athletic revolving, has been underfunded by \$100,000 for a couple of years. This is related to transportation costs and post covid. Members are proposing to raise athletic fees to avoid covering costs at the end of the year.
- Conant is a Blue Ribbon Award winner school for closing achievement gaps. Although the building is in bad shape, their community needs to be replicated.
- Today's panel teachers came willingly today because they understand the "existential threat" to their fellow teachers and the students if the override fails.

Board Members:

- Where there are user fees (athletics, ADK, senior parking) please raise them. There are resources available for students who cannot afford them.
- Re athletic fees, have we considered fees for all extracurricular activities? This was considered at the previous meeting and is in the budget for next year.
- There are people who cannot be at the meetings and need clarity regarding what will be cut and why so they can plan accordingly.
- Re E&D, if we could convert to GIC mid year, would the \$1M go into savings? Mr. Light replied that excess revenue goes into E&D at year end, as well as anything below what was budgeted. There are ways the School Committee could move some savings to certain purposes (such as to repay OPEB).
- Re asking people who use services to shoulder more of the costs, it may make sense to go back to some community supported funding (such as PTOs) as was done in the past.
- How many towns charge for public All Day Kindergarten? (6 or 7 towns in MA) Are we taking advantage of kindergarten parents by making them pay? There is not a funding mechanism to complete the plan for the District to cover this. AB has less than 10 students who attend half day kindergarten.
- Re abatements, because property values are so high, a Boxborough resident said that abatements are difficult to get. The extra \$100/month average tax increase if the override passes would be hard for people. We need to get the word out about available resources.

3:00-3:30

A & B Budgets Discussion and Next Steps

1. Adam asked members if the currently proposed A budget was supported by the School Committee, or based on feedback, should the Administration be asked to find more cuts? The Committee needs to vote a preliminary budget at their next meeting on February 15th. This would be a "not to exceed" budget number.

Committee comments included:

- Is the FY25 budget number the baseline for FY26 eventhough many of these are one time structural costs? Yes, although this doesn't mean numbers have to stay the same. If savings are realized in health care for instance, that line item could be reduced and can be allocated somewhere else. Two big changes in FY26 will be health insurance costs and debt from the JH and HS that comes

off the budget. See multiyear models that have been projected.

- Members of ALG and Acton Boards have been having this conversation since October however Boxborough has not been considering it as long. There was much discussion regarding that the proposed A budget pushes Boxborough toward its levy limit. Strong Boxborough voices advocated for a 10% assessment (\$110M budget), which would be a huge impact. Both towns “need to be pulling in the same direction”. A member insisted that Boxborough’s request to lower their assessment be taken seriously but 10% was “unreasonable”. Other options should be considered.
- Because we don’t have GIC settled yet it is premature to include those savings in this proposed budget.
- A “C” Budget is needed with more cuts. Some Acton residents are also saying they cannot afford it.

There was a discussion of removing \$1.3M from the A Budget, bringing it to \$114M and resulting in a 14% assessment increase to Boxborough. This would be a compromise to the 10% figure that Boxborough board members asked for. The Superintendent was asked what cutting \$1.3M might look like. Additional cuts might mean losing library media positions and digital literacy coaches and programs. At the elementary level it could mean the coaching model, in addition to already losing curriculum staff. At the JH it could mean loss of a team and administrative staff. At the HS it could mean more loss of teaching staff and programs that directly impact kids. There could be other areas. Mr. Light is concerned about reducing capital spending and OPEB contributions. He would rather preserve capital spending and pause on OPEB contributions, then bring it back when health insurance is solved. A placeholder would be kept for OPEB because we know that funding has to come back. The Superintendent asked for guidance from the Committee to take back to the leadership team before revising a budget for the vote on Thursday.

Members agreed that an additional reduction of \$1.3M would be a compromise. They were generally comfortable with pausing OPEB. There was anxiety about removing all of the coaches because it could be difficult to bring them back the next year. Mr Light suggested that OPEB could be reduced very cautiously in year 1 and leadership could brainstorm ways to not affect the direction of programs being cut.

Boxborough board members expressed concern about support for either number. Some members have not felt part of the process and have felt like it has been “Acton’s lead”. This will be considered in future years. They will share this new information at the Boxborough Finance Committee meeting on Tuesday.

It was clarified that there will be an A and B budget, and this proposal would create a lower A budget. When asked if there was any immediate risk of not funding OPEB for one year, it was explained that it could be a bond rating agency question. Early this year, this question was asked and there were no concerns about a one year withdrawal but there could be if it was done regularly.

In response to a question, Mr. Light explained that open enrollment, MTSS, adding

special education staff and other similar decisions did not drive the District into this financial challenge. The issue was extraordinary increases in costs over a short time so that the base of our budget could not keep up. A lot of the funding gap was filled with pandemic relief. Inflation numbers are best case projections. If the administration does all they can and inflation goes our way, the Superintendent thinks raising the budget this first year should allow them to manage the future budgets. A board member stressed that that should be communicated to the public, along with the projections, as leverage to support the A budget. Mr. Light commented that the District being cautious because we thought we would be in a better position a year ago. The Superintendent believes that the A budget that is being proposed will put the District in a significantly better position. Otherwise, he would propose a different alternative.

The cost shift based on enrollment alone creates an increase for Boxborough, even with a 0% increase. It was suggested that ALG move to an Acton Boxborough Leadership Group to get the Boxborough Select Board and Finance Committee members involved earlier in the Fall.

An Acton Select Board member agreed with postponing the OPEB contribution this year. While sympathetic to a 15% increase to Boxborough's assessment, he disagreed that Acton was responsible for it. The School Committee decided to set the budget at \$2M below level services and create the need for an override in Acton. The Selectboard will vote at their next meeting on this. In previous years, he explained, Boxborough has benefited from Acton hitting their levy limit. In addition the three year rolling average benefits the growing town, which has been Boxborough in previous years.

An Acton Finance Committee member stressed that using OPEB to fill the gap is not a cut. In his opinion, it is "kicking the can down the road", and one time steps like this should not be used to solve the problem. Ginny Kremer stressed that the Committee is not even asking for a level service budget. Both proposed budgets involve cuts.

Adam Klein asked the Committee if they were satisfied with the \$115M proposed budget or if it should come down to give the Administration guidance? Should \$1M be cut further? Should the OPEB funding and one other reduction be proposed? Because the preliminary budget has to be voted on at the next meeting, there is no more time to discuss details with other boards. Mr. Light advocated for not doing anything further with reserves for next year. He worries about the HVAC units at the HS that could have trouble at any time. A significant Parker Damon Building system failure occurred this year that led to significant costs. He wants to preserve capital stabilization funds due to the age of our buildings and any unexpected needs for repairs. Members discussed if All Day Kindergarten tuition should be increased, as well as how much OPEB could be deferred, in order to avoid cutting more teachers. A member stated the Committee's responsibility to taxpayers and the students. Stressed out teachers cannot "show up" at their best. She was not comfortable cutting beyond the OPEB piece. Adam noted that making this cut is a compromise but not a good one because it does not solve a structural problem. The Committee was cautioned the risk of trying to hold onto this

number of personnel, is that it could mean a larger loss if the override fails. “We have to come up with a number that people will vote for. Not everyone can afford this.”

There was consensus from the School Committee to ask that the Superintendent bring an additional \$1M of cuts to the Committee at their next meeting on February 15. Mr. Light wants to give real thought, with his leadership team, to whether he can recommend that level of OPEB reduction and combination to be sure that FY26 doesn't become a problem. He will report to the School Committee with a recommendation and then the Committee can decide. This will also allow Boxborough board members to discuss at their meeting how they feel about an additional \$1M of cuts. The new proposed A budget would be not to exceed \$114,312,084.

2. Thoughts for structural changes and next steps

There was consensus from the Committee to form a task force to address some of the longer term structural issues, as recommended by the Superintendent. Members who are interested should email Adam. Three School Committee members are suggested. The Committee is committed to finding additional savings from structural changes.

Adam requested confirmation from the School Committee of their position regarding the override that was reached by consensus at the previous meeting. This was due to some confusion about the number that members had agreed to. There was consensus, again, that the School Committee supports a \$6.6M override in Acton. Lakshmi noted that she supports an override but not the \$6.6M number.

Another Community Coffee with the Superintendent and School Committee Chair will be on Monday night.

The Acton Finance Committee adjourned. Other boards did not have quorums.

3:30

Adjourn

At 4:25 p.m. Lakshmi Kaja moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to adjourn the ABRSC.

The ABRSC FY25 Annual Budget Hearing will be held March 7, 2024 at 7:00 p.m. in the Administration Building Auditorium. The Committee will vote on a final budget on March 21, 2024 (45 days prior to the first Town Meeting).

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: agenda, presentation slides