



WESTWOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Honoring Tradition, Inspiring Excellence, Shaping the Future

EMILY J. PARKS
Superintendent of Schools

IMPORTANT DISTRICT UPDATES

May 31, 2020

Dear Westwood Public Schools Parents:

I am writing today to update you on some important developments in the District this spring. This is a lengthy letter. I appreciate your taking the time to read it.

The current public health crisis and the resulting economic difficulties are impacting us all. In addition, the anger and pain that has again erupted as our country confronts the wounds created by our historical and ongoing inequities and injustices around race have many of us feeling a sense of confusion and despair. The challenges are real and we continue to work on them as a community. As we all navigate the issues we are facing, if nothing else, we are provided with another opportunity to consider our responsibilities to each other, reaffirm our commitment to take care of and protect everyone in our school community, and do our best to treat each other with understanding and empathy.

I want to make sure that you are aware of the discussions the School Department has been having about the financial challenges resulting from the pandemic and to foreshadow some of our planning for the fall. A superintendent in a neighboring district put it succinctly: *As we look toward next year (and probably the year after), we don't know how much money we will have and we don't know what we are budgeting for.* Quite a challenging context. The School Committee discussed this situation at length at the May 20th School Committee meeting. You can view a [video of that meeting on the Westwood Media Center website](#).

Most of the district's \$48 million operating budget comes from local and state dollars that are allocated to the schools by the voters at Town Meeting. In Westwood, the bulk of town funds earmarked from the school budget comes from local property taxes and state aid to schools (referred to as "Chapter 70 funds."). Fortunately, Westwood is a community where residents are committed to supporting and investing in schools.

In addition to the locally allocated dollars, our operating budget includes offsets from other revenue sources. Most significantly, our budget assumes about \$1.5 million from federal and state grants and reimbursements, mainly related to special education, and significant funds from other offsets that are generated through things such as fees (e.g. athletics, preschool tuition, building use fees, etc.).

We developed the budget for the next school year last fall and proposed it in January. The School Committee and the Town's Finance and Warrant Commission supported our proposed budget and forwarded it for residents' consideration at Town Meeting. In Westwood, Town Meeting usually happens the first week of May, but it couldn't be held as scheduled this year given the restrictions on large gatherings. The Town is working hard to ensure that the meeting is held by the end of June (i.e. the end of the fiscal year) so that the budget can be voted.

Unfortunately, the state's budget process has also been significantly delayed which means that we will be going into the local budget vote at Town Meeting without knowing for sure what our state funding will be. While that scenario sometimes happens, we are usually able to make fairly accurate projections about where the state budget will land. This year, though, is problematic. With the passage of the Student Opportunity Act last fall, Massachusetts had announced with some fanfare a historic increase in education funding next year. Districts, including Westwood, went into the budget process expecting to receive an increase in Chapter 70 funding in FY'21. Now, however, given the state of the economy, the state is projecting its revenue to be down by \$5-6 billion. It seems likely, therefore, that Chapter 70 funds to schools will be much lower than anticipated. In addition to not receiving the anticipated increase, the funding level is likely to be cut.

The good news is that Westwood is a well-managed community and had the foresight to prepare for this kind of "rainy day." In our Budget Steering conversations, the Town has indicated that they are prepared to use stabilization funds to fill a gap in the District's Chapter 70 allocation for FY'21. **This is critically important for us.** If that is the case, then we hope that our FY'21 budget will pass with the same "bottom line" number that we proposed back in January.

However, that will no longer be enough. We are very concerned given the fiscal climate that the revenue for our budget offsets will be substantially lower than projected. For example \$780,000 of our budget comes from "circuit breaker" reimbursement -- that is, partial reimbursement that school districts receive to offset very high special education costs, such as out-of-district tuition payments. Right now, circuit breaker is funded at a rate of 75%. In 2009, during the last significant economic downturn (arguably less significant than what we face today), the circuit breaker reimbursement rate was cut to 30%. It seems prudent, therefore, to assume a similar loss of revenue in FY'21. At this

point, we can only work from our best guess, but we know that we need to plan for a significant cut.

In addition to the uncertain and gloomy picture on the revenue side, we are also left to speculate about our costs. The proposed FY'21 operating budget was developed with a typical year in mind. At this point, it's unclear how this crisis will impact school next year. At the very least, we know that we will have costs associated with enhanced cleaning protocols and substantial costs related to education as we address the impact of disrupted learning this spring. If we are in a situation where we need to socially distance and perhaps run school on an alternate schedule or model, we could be faced with increased transportation costs or other unanticipated expenses. We are awaiting guidance from the state about school reopening, but assume that we will need to plan and budget for various scenarios for next year.

With all of this in mind, the District is faced with some hard choices as we consider staffing and schedules for next year. Realistically, we need to reallocate at least \$1 million to "backfill" offsets that will not come to fruition and to pay for things that we couldn't possibly have anticipated during the budget process last fall. With this in mind, the district leadership team developed a set of guiding principles to use as a framework for making these difficult decisions:

- Make decisions around hiring and scheduling this spring that will allow us to preserve programs, stabilize the budget, and adapt to this new unprecedented environment.
- To the extent possible, maintain class sizes with School Committee guidelines. If not possible to do so, continue to prioritize reasonable class sizes in grades K-2 given early literacy and numeracy needs, at moments of transition (Grade 6 and 9), and for vulnerable populations.
- Make hiring/staffing choices that are sustainable given upcoming enrollment trends and potential elementary consolidation.
- Maintain student mental health and social/emotional programming and services.
- Carefully consider HS student elective choices; to the extent possible fill elective sections using student alternates, rather than running very small classes.
- To the extent possible, maintain momentum on important priorities and initiatives, recognizing that new initiatives for 2020-2021 will probably be put on hold.
- With all of the above in mind, examine to what extent this can be accomplished through attrition.

At the May School Committee meeting, I discussed the elimination of 14.5 FTE positions. To accomplish these cuts, other than a few exceptions where the impact would not be tenable, we will not be filling vacancies due to retirements, resignations, etc. We have also had to make some cuts beyond what could be accomplished through attrition. If

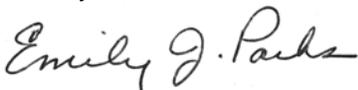
the budget picture improves or is at least clearer by August, the School Committee will revisit the situation.

We are living through an unprecedented moment in our nation's history and difficult choices are part of that reality. Superintendents expect to receive a written report in mid-June from the state working group that has been formed to determine the process for school reopening. Though we are all hopeful that school will resume fully in-person in the fall, we are preparing for the possibility that we will have to implement other models. With that understanding, we are actively planning internally for various scenarios. We are prepared for a busy summer as we address the myriad of issues that will undoubtedly be revealed once we receive the state's parameters for school in the fall. As part of that planning process, next week, we will be sending a survey to parents asking for your feedback about this spring's remote learning model in order to inform our thinking.

Finally, as you know, schools are closed for in-person instruction with students through at least June 29th. We expect to receive information from the state this week about summer programs. Our top priority is to run our Extended School Year (ESY) special education programs. We will run ESY in person, if permitted and feasible, and/or remotely, if necessary. When we get the summer guidance this week, we will make a decision about summer enrichment programs. It is possible that the socially distancing, group size restrictions, and PPE requirements will make it necessary to cancel summer enrichment so that we can invest our time and resources in reopening school in the fall.

We are thinking carefully about the difficult choices that have to be made, always keeping students at the heart of our decision-making and always balancing a sense of optimism and realism. I continue to appreciate and thank you for your support. Please be on the lookout for the remote learning survey next week and the date for Town Meeting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emily J. Parks".

Emily Parks
Superintendent