

School Committee Budget Process

Written by Superintendent and GMRSC

GMRSD Budget Process

There are two parallel courses of action that occur simultaneously and collaboratively during budget building – a micro, or building-level, process and a macro, or district-wide, process. Each process informs and guides the other throughout. The Superintendent, Administrative Team, and Staff are responsible for the micro process and the School Committee (in collaboration with the Superintendent) is responsible for the macro process. The timeline for these processes is dependent upon the deadlines established by local district policy, the Massachusetts General Laws and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. These two sets of actions occur simultaneously and parallel to one another until they converge at the point of the preliminary draft district budget. Throughout this process transparency and communication between the two processes are critically important.

This proposed budget process is not currently the practice within the district, nor has it been for some time. For the past several years, the budgets have been “rolled over” and then adjustments made as necessary. While that is certainly understandable and necessary at times, a more collaborative process breeds buy-in and ownership at all levels. This is not a zero-based budget process per se, but it does not assume that everything that is in the current budget needs to stay in the next year’s budget. Staff and administration will be evaluating programs and personnel and analyzing costs and benefits.

Educators’ Role

This phase of the process ensures that building level concerns and issues are raised by the appropriate building level administrator in conjunction with the staff and the School Community Council.

The budget building process begins at the building levels as well as at the district level. Teachers should submit requests for books, teaching materials, supplies, equipment and furniture, and furnish budget related comments on the educational program, directly to the principals by a date specific. These requests should include rationales so the principals can understand why specific items are being requested. Principals then review and discuss the requests with the appropriate teachers to determine what is truly needed and to fully understand requests and pedagogical comments.

At the same time that the teachers are preparing their individual budget requests building principals are preparing their building level budget requests. These would include staffing needs, school-wide supplies, materials, equipment and furniture. These proposals should also be specific and include rationales for the superintendent and school committee.

The building level budget proposals should be submitted to the School Community Councils for review and recommendations, providing the members with information and justification for the proposed expenditures. The School Community Councils will then submit the recommended budgets to the Superintendent.

At the same time that principals and teachers are building their budgets, the central office administrative team is also preparing its budget requests.

The principals and central office administrators then submit their preliminary requests to the Business Office by a predetermined specific date. The requests are then entered into the budget software and a preliminary district budget is created.

The Superintendent meets with the building principals and central office administrators to review the preliminary budget to make any appropriate adjustments prior to School Committee review. This may take multiple sessions as it becomes a collaborative effort to meet the educational and fiscal priorities of the district.

Once this is completed, the Superintendent presents the revised preliminary budget to the School Committee. This

budget is based upon the educational needs and priorities of the district as determined by the administrative team, staff, and councils. It is then the responsibility of the School Committee to review and act upon the Superintendent's budget in collaboration with the Superintendent and his staff.

School Committee Role

The School Committee should begin its budget process by reviewing historic budget and revenue trends with the Superintendent and Director of Business & Operations and assessing resource allocations among the seven Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks as provided in Equity Policy DAA.

The School Committee should also discuss its current goals and priorities as well as review all current district initiatives to determine their cost, how many are funded by grants, when they were first granted, and who benefits from them in order to provide guidance to the administration and staff as they work through their process.

There must be recognition that there is a structural budget gap that has to be addressed in order to move toward fiscal sustainability for the communities.

As such, three goals should be addressed collaboratively by the School Committee, the State and the member towns:

1. Develop a consensus estimate of the current "structural budget deficit" (primarily the sum total of reserves, one-time revenues and unrealistically optimistic budget assumptions imbedded in the FY 2010 budget). Develop a variety of budget cut and revenue increase scenarios to "solve" the deficit within a realistic time frame. Reach a consensus on the most viable scenario(s).
2. Develop a long-term plan to reduce the chronic budget gaps that have produced this structural deficit, using current research and data from multiple resources as a starting point.
3. Develop a consensus on the fiscal impact of regional collaboration and consolidation. This should include estimated cost "savings" for specific scenarios. A consensus on the fiscal impact of regional reorganization should not preclude serious consideration of the non-fiscal benefits of such reforms.

The School Committee should meet with Town officials and Finance Committee members at the beginning of the budget process to discuss a variety of issues that will impact the upcoming year's budget. This discussion should focus on town revenue estimates, GMRSD educational goals, capital planning, and progress on the long-term fiscal plan. The goal should be a budget that is affordable to the towns and meets realistic educational goals.

The School Committee and town officials should be working together to advocate with the legislature regarding educational funding, mandates, and programs. This is the work that must be done regionally and collaboratively, and this is where the majority of effort should be focused because it will have a greater positive impact upon the communities than simply cutting the operating budgets of the municipalities and the school district or raising assessments.

The School Committee can, as an option depending upon the factors listed above, determine either a percentage increase/decrease or a specific dollar amount increase/decrease to provide the Superintendent with a bottom line budgetary target. Especially during difficult economic times, this can assist the administration and staff to build comprehensive budgets that meet the agreed upon educational initiatives and priorities of the district without concern they will subsequently be reduced by the School Committee.

Once the superintendent has submitted the preliminary budget to the School Committee, it becomes the responsibility of the School Committee, the Superintendent and the Administrative Team, all working in conjunction with DESE and the Towns, to reduce any projected budget shortfalls in a way consistent with the educational goals of the district and any preliminary plan for long-term stability.

The School Committee asks clarifying questions, requests additional information, and makes recommendations for adjustments if necessary. The Superintendent and Administrative Team then refine the budget based on this review and re-submit for review and action by the School Committee. There can be multiple steps in this sequence in order

to arrive at a final budget that the majority can approve and support.

It is important to remember that the School Committee is responsible for the bottom line budget number and to ensure that its priorities and goals are incorporated broadly into the budget. It is the responsibility of the administration to determine how those priorities and goals are met within the budget itself. It is everyone's collective responsibility to understand and take ownership of all aspects of the budget.

Finally, the School Committee votes on a final budget figure and will explain the assumptions and basis for the proposed budget. Members voting in support of the budget are encouraged to support and defend proposed budget to the public, press, and the community.

Budget Timeline

o On or before February 1, the School Committee prepares a tentative maintenance and operating budget for the next fiscal year.

Gill-Montague Regional Agreement

o Copies of the tentative budget are mailed to the chairman of the board of selectmen of each member town and to the chairman of the finance committees of each member town.

Gill-Montague Regional Agreement

o Before the approving of the school budget, the School Committee shall hold a public hearing on the tentative budget not later than Feb. 15th. This hearing must be advertised in the newspaper and conducted not less than 7 days after the publication of the notice. A copy of the budget shall be made available at the superintendent's office or another place designated by the SC for the public at least 48 hours before the hearing.

Gill-Montague Regional Agreement

Chapter 71, Section 38N

o The School Committee, by a 2/3 majority vote of all its members, must adopt an annual operating and maintenance budget for the next fiscal year not later than 45 days prior to the earliest date on which the business session of the annual town meeting of any member town is to be held, but not later than March 31st.

Chapter 71, Section 16M