

May 13, 2020

Senator Philip Baruth, Chair
Members, Senate Education Committee

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee:

I am a citizen in the Windham Southeast School District, encompassing the towns of Brattleboro, Guilford, Putney and Dummerston and Brattleboro Union High School District #6. I have been a school board member in the past for a number of years and I care very deeply about all of our area's children and our schools. Please let me make a few points about your funding proposal.

1. The proposal you are making talks about last year's budget, as voted by the population. At the moment of the first annual meeting of the WSESD on Tuesday, June 25, 2019, we were all still independent districts. On July 1st, 2019 we were merged into one district called Windham Southeast School District. This budget of our new district is the combination of the five previous districts, all of which had undergone the usual scrutiny by each of the individual district's boards. Four of the budgets had already been voted on by the voters in each of the independent school districts.

2 – The budget presented to the public was amended by \$100,000 to address our district's support for equity and justice for our diverse community and student body. (Taken from 2020 Annual Report - “further, having all kids of diversity celebrated, supported and reflected in our schools is important to all students' development, but especially so to indigenous students and students of color, students who identify as LGBTQ, disabled students, students who are affected by economic insecurity and other marginalized students”). The amendment passed on a floor voice vote adding the \$100,000.

3 – The 2020 budget, as amended, totaled \$50,276,318.

4 - The proposed 2021 budget is \$51,171,300 which is a 1.8% increase. This budget has not been voted on yet because of Covid 19.

5 – The new merged board set and warned March 17, 2020 as the date for the Annual Meeting and the budget for the new district vote.

6 - This vote did not take place because of Covid 19. The Board quickly met and postponed the meeting and vote to May 12, 2020.

7 - The Board is presently in the process of figuring out when and how they can warn a vote and in what manner the vote will take place.

a – Unfortunately, if the vote ends up being by Absentee Ballot, this will add at least \$14,000-\$20,000 to the budget.

b. If we are still under threat of the virus, it is unknown who will handle the vote and who will count the ballots. Most of the people who do this are older and more vulnerable.

8 - It is my understanding that if teachers need to be rified, June 1st is the riff date. Not knowing the future of this virus and quarantine, the board will have to give notice to quite a few teachers and will most likely end up losing some of our youngest and brightest teachers. (who are also the least expensive because of contractual matters). An Administrator has told the Board they were already writing recommendations for teachers looking to leave since they feared being rified. For a District that has had top notch schools, this can be disastrous.

For all of the above, I am really concerned about the Senate's proposal. Our District has worked hard to comply with the State's mandated requirements for a budget vote. We have not refused to vote. We have followed the rules and set up a vote, two times so far. It is not our District's fault that Covid 19 has gotten in the way.

I am asking you to please take this all into consideration before putting us in the same category of those Districts who have done nothing.

I sincerely hope you will consider what you might be doing to individual Districts and especially to the education of their valuable students and teachers who have already had so much to contend with. It is not their fault. I also am very worried about the marginalized students and those affected by economic insecurity. These most often are the ones with no access to the internet for learning and perhaps do not have parents equipped or available to help them study and learn during this time away from school. Even if they are able to go back to school in the Fall they will undoubtedly require a lot of extra work to help them stay on track. In WSESD the poverty rate is very high. For the year 2019-2020, the percentage of students approved for free and reduced-price school meals for the three Brattleboro based elementary schools is as follows:

Green Street School – 90.83%
Academy School - 79.17%
Oak Grove School - 70.15%

The state average is: - 38.32

Please make sure you that whatever decision you make will not be disenfranchising a whole generation.

Sincerely,

Jody Normandeau
jodydvt@gmail.com
802-380-9027

Dummerston and WSESD