

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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Schools Budget Approved, With No Public Input

BY **Melissa Bailey** | FEB 9, 2010 9:10 AM

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MELISSA BAILEY PHOTO

The newly “transparent” school board approved a \$324 million spending plan three days after seeing the proposal for the first time, and before the public even got a hint of what’s in it.

By a unanimous vote Monday night, the Board of Education approved its budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year, which starts on July 1. The proposal now passes to the Board of Aldermen for a final vote. The aldermen cannot tinker with line items the way they can with other city departments.

School board members approved the plan after a presentation by Will Clark (pictured above), the school district’s chief operating officer, at the board’s full meeting. The budget determines which schools will be rebuilt, how many textbooks bought, and how many teachers will fill classrooms in September.

The proposal includes a \$176.0 million “operating budget” for the city schools. That represents an increase of \$3.0 million, or 1.7 percent over the current year. ([Click here](#) to see that portion of the spending plan.)

Other costs not included in that figure: \$80.2 million in school-related employment benefits and debt service; \$4.9 million on capital projects and \$62.5 million in other costs paid for by special funds. The total education package tallies to \$323.6 million.

Schools Superintendent Reggie Mayo said he will need to trim in some places to keep the budget that size, but “we are going to stay away from the classroom. We are going to try not to lay off people.”

The budget vote came two weeks after Mayor John DeStefano [urged the school board to be “transparent”](#) in decision-making, so that the public finds school reform plans credible.

The proposed budget was slipped onto Monday’s school board agenda at the last minute with no prior public hearing.

Asked about that, DeStefano said Monday the budgeting process was transparent enough.

Standing at a podium facing the horseshoe of school board members, Clark made his case for why the schools budget needs an extra boost.

Clark reminded the board that in 2009, he [stood before them and asked for](#) a \$5 million increase over the \$173 million budget the mayor had proposed. The school board approved the request, but the Board of Aldermen rejected it, sending the school board back to find \$5 million in cuts.

The school district is still digging out of that deficit, Clark said: “We’re still two to three million in the hole.”

This year, Clark is making a more modest request, a \$3 million increase. He noted that two-thirds of the proposed hike would go to pay raises for teachers.

“The teachers really drive the bus. As teachers go, the budget goes,” Clark said.

Clark and the teachers union agreed to cut about 15 teaching positions next year, according to teachers union President Dave Cicarella. No one would lose jobs because the cuts would be easily absorbed by attrition, Cicarella said. Each year, at least 40 of the district’s 1,700 teachers retire, he said.

The job cuts would save the district \$1 million, Clark said.

The district is currently negotiating with all the other education-related labor unions, including custodians, Clark said. He said he’s asking unions to follow in the footsteps of the 12-person trades union, which agreed to freeze wages and switch medical costs in its latest contract.

“We’re expecting to see concessions,” Clark said. If not, the district would move forward with “targeted privatization or reductions.”

The plan calls for spending \$145.7 million for school construction projects. That includes rebuilding four schools: Helene Grant, Micro Society, New Haven Academy and Hyde Leadership. The state would pay the lion’s share, \$127.0 million. The city would pay \$18.7 million.

Alex Johnston, an education watchdog who recently joined the board, asked about the revenue side of the budget, which isn’t detailed in the spending plan.

DeStefano replied that the schools expect to see a \$400,000 drop in state funding, due to a reduction in transportation aid, judging by Gov. M. Jodi Rell’s State of the State speech last week. The largest state grant, Education Cost Sharing, will stay even, DeStefano said. That means total state aid for education would drop from \$149.2 million to \$148.8 million.

“Community Discussion” & The Budget

Monday’s approval came on short notice. Johnston said he took his first look at the budget on Saturday, two days before the vote. The budget proposals were hand-delivered to board members over the weekend, he said.

Members of the public weren’t so lucky. The Administration/Finance Committee did not hold a public hearing on the matter, according to Clark. Clark said he showed the spending plan to two members of the board, Liz Torres and Ferdinand Risco, in a private meeting.

News of the upcoming budget vote was not made public until 4:44 p.m. Friday, when the agenda for Monday’s meeting was emailed out—just under the wire for state Freedom of Information Act requirements. The agenda included this description: “2010-2011 Budget Request—Approval.”

Board members discussed the matter for less than 40 minutes Monday before approving the plan by an 8-0 vote. Only one member of the public spoke at the meeting. She did not address the budget, except in passing.

Most of the discussion among the board surrounded what to do in future budgeting years.



Mayor DeStefano (pictured) said starting with fiscal year 2011-12, he'd like to see the district shift to a school-based budgeting system, where each school's budget, including supplies, utilities and staffing, are listed separately. He said that would match the school's reform plans, which aim to shift from a top-down management system to one that's decentralized.

"If we're encouraging accountability by school," he reckoned, the board "should be budgeting by school." Once the spending is listed school by school, that may spark lively discussion about allocation of resources, DeStefano said. He said he'd welcome the debate.

Johnston said he'd seen that type of budgeting done in Hartford. He agreed it brings more transparency.

"It creates more community discussion around the budget," he said. When the budgets are broken down by school, it "does illustrate that some schools are benefiting from extra revenue," which can cause a vigorous debate, he said.

During the discussion, no one addressed the lack of a public discussion surrounding the budget proposal introduced and approved on Monday.

Clark said the procedure—a private workshop by members of the Administration/Finance (A/F) Committee, followed by a full board vote—was standard practice.

He was asked after the meeting if the process is "transparent."

"It's as transparent as any other process, I suppose," Clark said. He said the Board of Education is "just one department of many" that will be submitting requests to the mayor before he makes his budget proposal to the Board of Aldermen.

"Our approval here is just a referral [to the mayor] anyway," Clark said.

The mayor agreed. "This is a budget development process internal to the agency, just like the [departments of] public works, parks, library does theirs," he said. "Many of them have boards, too. Some of them look at their budgets. Some of them don't."

However, the Board of Ed budget works differently from other city department budgets. Unlike with city

departments, aldermen don't have line-by-line discretion over the school board budget. They can only vote up or down on the total budget amount.

Noting that education costs make up over half the city budget, one blue ribbon group last year [called for aldermen to take a stepped-up role](#) in scrutinizing education spending.

Does the mayor feel this year's school budgeting process needs more transparency?

He indicated not.

The school board budget gets adopted at the Board of Aldermen, the mayor replied.

"Could there have been a public hearing process here, too? I suppose there could be," the mayor said. "I suppose I could hold a public hearing process before I submit *my* budget, quite honestly, if you really think about it."

"I think this is obviously a public process right here," added Clark. "Anyone can come."

Clark said at the A/F committee's public meetings, "everything is transparent." "Every contract is part of the damn agenda, for God's sake."

Reached after the meeting, Johnston said as a new board member, he doesn't have a point of reference to say whether the budgeting process is transparent.

"I really don't know how this budget has worked in the past," Johnston said, but he welcomed the mayor's suggestion of shifting to school-based budgeting in the future. "There are some other ways that you could structure the budgeting process that would create the opportunity for engagement for a wide variety of folks."

Commenting has closed for this entry

Comments

posted by: Unbelievable on February 9, 2010 10:16am

...One or more of the following must be true: (1) apathy is rampant, (2) the voters are incredibly stupid, or (3) those who do bother to vote are somehow financially benefiting from King John's "reign". I'm sooo glad that I'm outa here.

posted by: Mark Oppenheimer on February 9, 2010 10:36am

There's no question but that the school budgeting process is the biggest problem in the city's finances. Because the alders must approve it as a block, and because the alders have not held the board accountable (which they could, through hearings) to ask what the money is going to, we really have no idea where the waste is. I don't think the budget is too big—but I do think, based on what I learned when I was editor of the New Haven Advocate, and based on other fine reporting by many people at the Indy and the Reg down through the years—that a lot of money is going to the wrong places. For example, do we need every person who works at the main office, the ones with six-figure salaries? Are they all the best people for their jobs? What are their job descriptions, and when were they last updated? If we truly want to support our public school teachers, we have to make sure the resources are indeed going to the classrooms, and not to administrative bloat. But our school committee is appointed, and our alders haven't been interested in playing any watchdog or investigative role.

Hey Independent folks—you know what a great story would be? Find out who works at the central office, what their job descriptions are, how long they have been there, and what exactly they do.

Or perhaps there are readers out there who know the answer to this question (a lot of it is public record).

It could turn out that all of them are essential personnel and highly qualified. But let's find out...

posted by: FIX THE SCHOOLS on February 9, 2010 12:15pm

Without fiscal transparency the building trust of the people will be squandered. Without the trust of the people, the reform initiative is that much harder to achieve.

The mayor, supt., and asst supt need to continue to do road shows. Only at their next road show, they need to break down the budget.

Over the next year, (and the supt. has said it himself) the focus will be on the accountability of the administration.

This is an inauspicious start on the road to reforming the administration of our public schools.

But its not too late. Get out there and present the numbers - soon.

posted by: Enrique on February 9, 2010 12:36pm

I am very glad to see that the Independent now routinely includes "Other costs not included" in the budget when stating the budget numbers—The proposal includes a \$176.0 million operating budget for the city schools. That represents an increase of \$3.0 million, or 1.7 percent over the current year.

Other costs not included in that figure: \$80.2 million in school-related employment benefits and debt service; \$4.9 million on capital projects and \$62.5 million in other costs paid for by special funds. The total education package tallies to \$323.6 million.

NHI could ask for or estimate that portion of the City debt that is directly related to school construction and operations. Even without this, the \$323.6 Million represents \$16,000 per student.(20,000 K-12 students). My last attempt to estimate the City debt related to Schools came up with \$37 million for 2008-9 which would add \$1,850 per student.

I tremble with trepidation—is trepitate a word?—at the reaction of the Director of Operations who has excoriated me mercilessly in the past for such budget exaggerations.

I like the statement about "School based budgets". Hartford has "Student based budgeting" with the Education budget allocated to students on the basis need and that student allocation becoming fungible between schools of the students choice. When is Student based budgeting coming to our own New Haven. I am a dying man with little time remaining!!!

Note also that there is no reference in this budget document to any measures of outcomes or performance expectations—how this new money will impact graduation rates, teacher effectiveness, school performance. Isn't this the place to link these outcomes to projected costs?

I see that we will see reductions in the teaching staff of 15 in a base of 1,700 or less than 1%. Not much pain given that 40 retire each year. The pain will be to students who will get less teaching time.

Has the Board of Aldermen ever rejected the Education budget in toto?? I believe the budget is approved as presented so resistance is futile.

Enrique (formerly My coolness)

posted by: Ben Berkowitz on February 9, 2010 12:51pm

DC just launched the first Real-Time Transparent Department Budget Visualization. NH should do this: <http://track.dc.gov>

posted by: What School Board on February 9, 2010 1:19pm

We could not possibly have a more clearer example of why we need to start school reform with changing how the schools are governed—meaning an elected School Board. That would be a reform. No one in their right mind approves a budget that large without reviewing and understanding it—which obviously was not done. These School Board members should be embarrassed to put themselves in positions where they are blatantly serving as cronies for the Mayor.

posted by: Budget Reality on February 9, 2010 1:45pm

Just like clockwork the annual Paul Bass attack on the Board of Education comes out once again. Bailey and Oppenheimer have joined the choir.

It is sad that the personal bias of alleged king makers who are desperate to destroy public education takes the place of news.

The budget request was presented in a public meeting. It will be further presented in additional public meetings as part of the City Budget request. All expenses within the budget are vetted at public meetings and voted on by Board members through committees and the Board itself. Bailey knows this but chooses to create the fiction of a lack of transparency. The only lack of transparency here is the NHI bias.

As Clark notes, how more transparent can you be than having a public meeting?

There has never been a public vetting on the Mayor's budget or any other department budget before the presentation of the Mayor's complete budget to the Board of Aldermen. Why does Bass and Bailey assign a different standard to Education? Once the City Budget is approved it changes 12 times in every monthly report and hiring and contracts are entered into without the Board of Aldermen ever voting again. Whereas the Board of Education specifically approves each contract and hire through transparent public meetings which the NHI regularly attends and knows about but chooses to ignore for the purpose of intentionally sensationalizing a

story.

If the NHI would care to actually report on facts as opposed to their preconceived story they would note that the Board of Education has, in a very transparent way, balanced its budget every year even when it was flat funded. The manner in which that was done and continues to be done was outlined at the Board meeting in public at some length, yet none of that made Bailey's story as it did not match the preconceived narrative.

Any reasonable unbiased comparison of Central Office or building leader positions would quickly reveal that New Haven actually does more with less and has far fewer staff than the other large districts and even many smaller ones in the State.

New Haven has a good foundation and is well positioned to engage in school reform. Perhaps that is what Bass is afraid of, if funded they might actually succeed.

posted by: JB on February 9, 2010 1:49pm

No one in their right mind approves a budget that large without reviewing and understanding it which obviously was not done.

I agree with ^^

A weekend is not long enough to review a document of that size and importance. Why wouldn't board members push the vote off until they had time to fully review and discuss? It's irresponsible.

At least a portion of that board should stand up and do the right thing with regards to the corruption and cronyism that goes along with the Dept of Education. No one else can.

posted by: westviller on February 9, 2010 2:25pm

This spectacle illustrates why school reform is doomed to fail. DeStefano, Mayo, et al parade around town asking parents to trust them while they continue to operate with the same secrecy and arrogance that brought us mediocrity in the first place. School reform cannot succeed if the public does not support it. Even if this is an ideal budget, the process creates suspicion and distrust. We will not support the effort if it continues to lack any hint of transparency and accountability from the top. I only hope that my new alderman will have enough spine to stand up to them and keep his promise to demand transparency.

posted by: sols on February 9, 2010 2:56pm

OK, well I read the document... my daughter is at a brand new school... and her classroom doesn't have supplies.. I look in the school budget, supplies is less than \$10 per kid!!! OK, maybe it comes from the district... guess what, the science line item is less than \$3000 for the whole district?! I don't understand.... her school has three different people that are in charge of reading, yet there are NO funds put aside for basic equipment (I donated rulers this year!!!) according to the science people at central office, it's not their problem.. so whose is it? Any of that great stimulus funds going towards basic classroom materials, or just to hire more and more reading consultants? That's what a Bd of Ed should do... set priorities!!! They should be saying, spend less on this subject, more on this... I don't care about the school based budgeting idea... seems like schools are making the wrong decisions NOW about how to spend money, so why isn't the Bd of Ed oversight for that? and why does the public have to wait for the newspaper to get a look at this?

posted by: Leslie Blatteau on February 9, 2010 6:26pm

beautifully put sols. quality instructional tools are crucial. teachers must also commit to use them in the classroom intelligently and help their students find value and purpose in the tools and the work they do with them.

we need schools to develop as communities where those who work there (students, teachers, parents, cooks, janitors, security guards, nurses, counselors, social workers, secretaries, carpenters) decide what they need to do their job. for this reason, budgets should be decided at the school level. we know the bureaucracy of the system is crippling. we also know some downtown clerical workers might lose their jobs. there are no simple solutions.

but for one leader to state that this is obviously a public process and then another board member to allude to the mayor's idea of shifting to school-based budgeting in the future is confusing and contrary to reform.

we know reform has to be BOLD. remember that word NHPS folks? we know it cant be another \$300+ million quick and dirty more of the same budget. we need decisions to be school-based. or we at least need to know that the mayor and the board of education are legitimately considering it for the future.

as a teacher, tax payer and community activist, i look forward to the education budget decision-making process for the 2012-2013 school year.

posted by: anon on February 9, 2010 6:38pm

How are the state and city spending \$146 million on new school construction (surely much more than that, in fact, when interest payments, admin, etc. are considered) when their budgets are billions of dollars in the hole?

posted by: Threefifths on February 9, 2010 7:39pm

FIX THE SCHOOLS

Without fiscal transparency the building trust of the people will be squandered. Without the trust of the people, the reform initiative is that much harder to achieve.

How can the people trust any of these people who are pushing this so call school reform. Everytime you look those in charge change the game rules. Wake up there will be not fiscal transparency. Were are you going to get the funds. The stae is broke and the city is broke. If you keep raising taxes, People will move out of this state or move to another town were the taxes are lower. I heard people are moving to orange and milford. and then they are puting there children in magnet schools in New Haven. As westviller said school reform is doomed to fail.

The mayor, supt., and asst supt need to continue to do road shows. Only at their next road show, they need to break down the budget.

Road shows are noting more than a stage for Con Artist, Snakeoil sell's Judas Goats and Carpet Baggers. Take you pick. The question I how did school board members read a budget on the weekend and than vote on it. Did they go line by line.

Over the next year, (and the supt. has said it himself) the focus will be on the accountability of the administration

You want bet. By next year most of them will be gone. Look into how many are retiring. Check out the golden parachute's that will be handed out.

This is an inauspicious start on the road to reforming the administration of our public schools.

But its not too late. Get out there and present the numbers - soon.

This is a start on the road to the corportist lining the pockets and trust funds. It the start of high taxes in new haven and the road to more school failure.

What School Board

We could not possibly have a more clearer example of why we need to start school reform with changing how the schools are governed meaning an elected School Board. That would be a reform. No one in their right mind approves a budget that large without reviewing and understanding it which obviously was not done. These School Board members should be embarrassed to put themselves in positions where they are blatantly serving as cronies for the Mayor.

I with you on this one all the way!!!!!!

posted by: me on February 9, 2010 8:14pm

>>ANON SAID: How are the state and city spending \$146 million on new school construction (surely much more than that, in fact, when interest payments, admin, etc. are considered) when their budgets are billions of dollars in the hole?

Have you ever been to Hyde Leadership in Hamden? Go there some day and check it out. It doesn't even have a library. Would you want your child going there? I think not.

Another thing: Is Polly McCabe losing its principal? No funding there.

posted by: working(too hard) mom on February 9, 2010 8:34pm

What a farce! All that money and NHPS continue year after year to fail the students and families of New Haven.

posted by: Observer on February 9, 2010 10:54pm

It is sad to see how Alex Johnston has been compromised by his role on the school board. I have a lot of respect for him and I can only imagine that this escapade is eating away at him because this flies in the face of everything he stands for at ConnCan. That's what happens when you get involved with DeStefano. First to go is your sense of obligation to the people you are supposed to be representing. Next is your values, then your integrity. Alex, resign from this charade before many more lose respect for you!

posted by: Equity on February 10, 2010 7:10am

A child based budget is an intriguing concept but the devil is in the details. We must not drive high achieving students out of the district, or fiscally punish top performing schools because we have allocated all of our resources to under-performers. A balance must be achieved. It is critical that truly open debate take place and reform results in a school district that meets the needs of all students. I would question any move that would model our plan after a school district such as Hartford's. Unless I've been living in a cave, Hartford is an example of how not to run a school district. There are some incredibly exciting things happening in the NHPS and now is the time to get involved and reinvent the process.

posted by: Greg Dildine on February 10, 2010 11:30am

Westviller,

Please contact me directly with what you'd like me to make more transparent.

posted by: RichTherrn on February 10, 2010 11:44am

The reality is that much of the budget IS school/site based already, except for teachers.. which is based on class sizes and program requirements. (i.e, each classroom has to have a teacher, every 8th grader has to take science, etc...), so it wouldn't matter which column they come under.

Some items, such as science kits for elementary students. ARE centralized, and not school based, but... Here's an example where we SAVE money, because we get the power of bulk purchasing, rotate the kits for maximum usage AND we share the costs by renting to other towns. That kind of info is discussed at the public BdEd subcommittees every year.

posted by: City Hall Watch on February 11, 2010 3:46pm

The BOE budget is unlike any other in city government. It is unwieldy, untamed and unexplainable. It consumes a huge chunk and by far the largest chunk of available local resources. To say this department is just like public works or the tax collector's budget is disingenuous. As we all know from past budget processes, even those presenting the school budget can barely explain it and it never gets a thorough airing out. It is mostly lump funded and the public never sees the details or has a chance to comment on it. It's pretty much an up or down vote. To say otherwise is to be both wrong and dishonest about a process we all know is deeply flawed in favor of the mayor and what he wants.

posted by: Hood Rebel on February 11, 2010 8:31pm

This sounds like gotcha reporting. How are school budgets approved in other urban districts and in Charter school districts?