

**BUDGET COMMITTEE
TOWN OF PEMBROKE, NH
DECEMBER 15, 2022 at 6:30 PM**

Mark LePage, Chairman, called the meeting to order at 6:30 pm.

I. Attendance:

Budget Committee Present:

Clint Hanson, Dave Doherty, Andy Camidge, Sue Whitbeck, Mark LePage, Brian Seaworth, Peter Gagy, Louis Caron, Matt Miller, Gene Gauss

Excused: Jenn Johnson and Gerry Fleury

II. Approval of Minutes – December 8, 2022:

Clint Hanson moved to approve the minutes of December 1, 2022. Dave Doherty seconded the motion. Motion passed 9-0. Gene Gauss abstained.

A brief discussion followed on the concept of voting abstention regarding meeting minutes. Based on a question posed in advance by Gerry Fleury, Mark LePage had done a bit of research and found that a vote to “abstain” is an election to not vote. The more appropriate response for an absence situation is a recusal.

III. Overview of Special Education (SPED):

Mark LePage introduced Karen Guercia, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services, and Patty Sherman, Superintendent. Mark framed the discussion by noting that with several new members on the committee, and several years having passed since the committee had last had an in-depth look, an overview of SPED would be useful as it accounts for a very considerable part of the overall School budget. Further, with SPED encompassing such a wide range of services and needs fulfillment, operating under extensive state and federal regulations, this background would be beneficial to all in advance of reviewing the upcoming budget.

Karen Guercia gave an overview of what special education encompasses. Copies of the SUA #53 Special Education Procedures Plan were provided, outlining procedures and policies for identifying students, agency coordination, confidentiality, safeguards, student evaluation, and other aspects. (This is also available on the SAYU website.)

Karen noted:

- Staff must meet the letter of the law (state and federal regulations).
- Students are identified as needing services through a referral process, which can be initiated by parents, teachers, or other methods.
- Students are evaluated through a variety of means including testing and observation.

- There has been a very significant increase in referrals of students needing services, most notably among preschool-age children. This trend began before COVID, and has continued.
- There has been an increase in the number of children requiring out-of-district placement, primarily for behavior issue or autism. In some cases these can present safety issues for the student, peers or staff, hence the need for out-of-district level of services.
- Costs for special placements are skyrocketing, now averaging nearly \$100,000/student, plus transportation.
- SPED transportation costs have also skyrocketed, in some cases to \$400-600/day due to fuel, lack of drivers, and licensing requirements.
- New Hampshire law exceeds federal law in many areas.
- Recent NH statute change now has schools responsible for students from ages 3 to graduation or age 22 (up from 21).
- There is an ongoing shortage of specialists with the district having openings that can span years. This has led to the need to use external contractors to provide mandated services, and added cost.

Sue Whitbeck asked if the State still comes in and conducts a review. Karen explained they still review but it is a different process now. They no longer come into the physical school and it is now broken into separate pieces. The School compiles data and sends the reports to the State. The State reviews each piece and assigns a grade. Patty explained there is a points-based scale they use. The State then takes all that data to satisfy their reporting requirements to the Federal Government.

Matt Miller asked how much of these reports are an exercise in compliance and how much do they have opportunities to improve the effectiveness of the performance of the programs. Karen answered it is both. They have to worry about compliance, but they also have to do what is best for the student. They will push the limits of compliance if it is in the best interest of the student. If they create a new program, such as the alternative middle school program, they need to get approval and can only operate within the confines of what was submitted to the State or Federal Government. However, if they want to do a change in type of instruction, such as a new reading program, they do not need to get approval.

Mark LePage asked how they receive reimbursement from Federal and State governments. Karen explained they receive special education aid from the State distributed to the district based on reaching a certain threshold of spending. That threshold is 3.5x the cost per pupil which changes year to year. Right now, it is around \$64,000 spent before they can submit. The bills and documentation are submitted in the summer, which is after the budget has been approved and the money has been spent, and any reimbursement funds would come in January. This year, they were able to recoup 90% of what was spent above and beyond the \$64,000 threshold. The State had extra funds available this year. The reimbursement typically ranges between 65-85%. The standard cost per student is based on the state average and not specific to Pembroke.

Andy Camidge explained the School budgets for every dollar they know they will spend based on who is coming up in each elementary school and they also have the capital reserve for anyone who unexpectedly joins the school system. Patty explained they have taken a chance the last few years and cut some money out of the special education budget lines knowing the last few years they have had surpluses and they have the trust fund to fall back on. Karen explained that because the costs for services are so high, one student coming or going may greatly affect the budget. Andy shared an example of recently removing a speech pathologist position in order to save money in the budget and the following year a student moved in that needed that service and they now have to contract that service out at a much higher cost than had they kept the original staff member.

Karen shared the trends for special education costs over the past few years. 2019-2020 up 2%, down 14% in 2020-2021, up 4% in 2021-2022, and up another 12% in 2022-2023. Mark LePage asked what the average cost per student is within the district. Andy answered it is around \$17,000. The average cost per special education student is around \$24,000. That \$24,000 is on top of the \$17,000 for an average of \$41,000. Some students are a lot more and some are less.

Karen shared the data of students with IEPs and 504s. A 504 is for individual accommodations which are often times medical such as needing a wheelchair or if they need to get up and walk around for a few minutes because they are unable to sit for a long time whereas an IEP is when a student needs services. Home education does not qualify for special education services. If a student needs services in a private school it is responsibility of the town where the school is located. It does not matter where that student is coming from. There are some funds available through the IDEA grant to pay for that student, but that money is finite. In a charter school, the district where the child resides is responsible for providing services. There is current legislation being worked on to change the responsibility from the public school system to the charter school.

Mark LePage asked what the current numbers of Special Education staffing are. Patty explained they try to have 1 case manager per grade level plus the specialists but those change depending on need. There are times where 1 case manager has to handle multiple grade levels. In the case of Pembroke Academy, each town is responsible for the costs of the students. If two students from two different towns need the same service, those costs are split.

IV. Other Business:

Patty shared the School Board received the full budget and warrant articles at their last meeting. The next meeting is Tuesday night to discuss and approve. The budget binders should be at Town Hall by Thursday.

The next meeting will be January 5, 2023 to begin review on the School District Budget.

V. Adjourn:

Dave Doherty made a motion to adjourn at 7:47 PM. Clint Hanson seconded the motion, and it was approved unanimously.

Mark LePage, Chairman