



AMHERST'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AT A CROSSROADS

How the Amherst School District's Warrant Articles
May Shape Amherst for Years to Come

ASD Ways & Means Committee

March 2023



Topics

- Roles and activities of the Amherst School District (ASD) Ways & Means (W&M) Committee.
- Our votes and rationale on the proposed ASD warrant articles.
- Q&A throughout.



Our Mission Statement

The Ways & Means Committee is a self-organizing advisory committee that provides independent input into and assessment of the executive budgeting decisions of the Amherst School Board, SAU39, and school leaders. Its role is to conduct due diligence into the strategic fiduciary decisions of the school district on behalf of the residents of Amherst.

The budgeting process should be a conversation between the school leadership, the SAU leadership, the School Board, the W&M Committee, and the public. The Committee participates actively, collaboratively, and transparently in the board's budgeting discussions — asking hard questions, making suggestions, and agreeing or disagreeing with decisions taken.

While its focus is on the proposed, upcoming annual school budgets, its perspective can cover multiple years of expenditures (past and future) as well as insights into how the Amherst School District schools compare with similar and aspirational ones in delivering educational value (academic outcomes achieved given the investments made).

The Committee's final deliverable is an independent report to the town's voters on its findings about the budgeting process and the educational value of the proposed budgets and warrant articles — including narratives explaining votes taken for and/or against specific articles.

A Framework for Strategic Governance

STRATEGIC Thinking
(What to Achieve)

Operational *GOVERNANCE*
(How to Achieve It)

Vision

Measurable
Goals

Strategic
Initiatives

Implementation &
Oversight

- Aspirational future
- Realistic
- Data-focused
- Research-driven
- Collaborative
- Board plans
- School/department plans focused on outcomes
- Constituents = students, taxpayers, teachers, staff
- Scope
- Costs
- Roles
- Timing
- Dependencies
- Capital Improvements
- Quantitative & qualitative assessment
- Periodic public updates
- Plan Adjustments

Constituent Communications



Elements of a Strategic Plan

1. **Mission** – Why the organization exists (enduring purpose).
2. **Vision** – How the mission will be achieved over the plan timeframe.
3. **Outcomes** – Constituent-centered results to be achieved.
4. **Investments** – Initiatives/resources to achieve outcomes.
5. **Structures and Staffing** – How to organize to do work.
6. **Operations and Procedures** – Best practices.
7. **Schedule** – Timeline to achieve planned outcomes.

**The schools do not have strategic plans.
Annual *budgeting* alone is not a substitute for such *planning*.**

Two Different W&M Perspectives

- Focus on year-over-year budget line items and how proposed spending compares to last year's.
- Look at the bigger picture:
 - Historic outcomes, staffing & spending patterns,
 - Future implications,
 - Comparisons with peer school systems,
 - Educational value for the dollars invested.



Collaboration with the Board and SAU on Comparison Districts & Schools

Enrollment by School [2021_22]

SAU / District / School (Grades)	Elementary	Middle School	High School
Amherst SAU Office			
Amherst			
Amherst Middle School (5-8)		648	
Clark-Wilkins School (P K 1-4)	671		
Mont Vernon			
Mont Vernon Village School (K 1-6)	216		
Souhegan Coop			702
Souhegan Coop High School (9-12)			702
Bedford SAU Office			
Bedford			
Bedford High School (9-12)			1,443
McKelvie Intermediate School (5-6)	678		
Memorial School (P K 1-4)	443		
Peter Woodbury School (K 1-4)	462		
Riddle Brook School (K 1-4)	520		
Ross A. Lurgio Middle School (7-8)		690	
Hanover SAU Office			
Dresden			
Frances C. Richmond School (6-8)	349		
Hanover High School (9-12)			688
Hanover			
Bernice A. Ray School (K 1-5)	497		
Hollis-Brookline SAU Office			
Brookline			
Captain Samuel Douglass Academy (4-6)	248		
Richard Maghakian Memorial School (P K R 1-3)	335		
Hollis			
Hollis Primary School (P K 1-3)	326		
Hollis Upper Elementary School (4-6)	287		
Hollis-Brookline Coop			
Hollis-Brookline High School (9-12)			830
Hollis-Brookline Middle School (7-8)		362	

Hopkinton SAU Office		
Hopkinton		
Harold Martin School (P K 1-3)	260	
Hopkinton High School (9-12)		321
Hopkinton Middle School (7-8)		135
Maple Street Elementary School (4-6)	208	
Oyster River SAU Office		
Oyster River Coop		
Mast Way School (K 1-4)	323	
Moharimet School (K 1-4)	291	
Oyster River High School (9-12)		858
Oyster River Middle School (5-8)		629
Windham SAU Office		
Windham		
Golden Brook Elementary School (P K R 1-2)	1,093	
Windham Center School (3-5)	424	
Windham High School (9-12)		1,058
Windham Middle School (6-8)	452	

We compared our K-8 schools with six districts suggested by the interim superintendent and Board:

Bedford, Hanover, Hollis-Brookline, Hopkinton, Oyster River, and Windham

Collaboration with the Board and SAU on Metrics

We expected to receive metrics in four areas:

- **Subject Matter Assessments:** English language arts, math, science, social studies, languages, etc. *Only state-mandated test scores and NWEA test scores for ELA and Math.*
- **Functional Skills:** Critical thinking, ability to work alone and on teams, problem solving, communications, etc. *No metrics available from the SAU.*
- **Social-Emotional Well-Being of Students:** *No metrics available from the SAU.*
- **Special Services:** How well the schools serve the needs of students with special educational or developmental needs. *No metrics available from the SAU.*



Preparing to Assess the Warrant Articles

We conducted five analyses to underpin our thinking on the warrant articles:

1. Historical spending patterns of ASD and peer districts/schools.
2. Assessing the educational value of past investments (outcomes compared to taxes spent).
3. Why ASD costs are so high and what to do about them.
4. SAU administrative spending and its impact on ASD budgets.
5. Assessment of the proposed new elementary school.

Each has been published along with a tax estimator covering all town and school articles. Find them at:

<https://www.sau39.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=263462&pageId=369312#>



Working Sessions with the Board & SAU

- ASD Board and SAU members participated in our meetings.
- Lots of discussion and debate on all analyses.
- All analyses/reports were reviewed for accuracy.
- Participated in budget subcommittee working sessions to review budget line items.
- Toured the Wilkins School and Amherst Middle School.



WHAT WE FOUND

Educational Outcomes

1. Of today's ASD students, only about one third will be ready to do college-level work in *both* ELA and math upon graduation from high school.
2. About one third will *not* be ready to do college-level work in *either* ELA or math.
3. Other students will be college-ready in *one or the other*, but not both.

NWEA Predictions of the % of ASD Students Likely to be College Ready in ELA and Math Upon Graduation

Report Year	ELA	MATH	BOTH	NEITHER
2017-2018	68%	54%	47%	26%
2018-2019	59%	43%	36%	35%
2019-2020	66%	36%	33%	31%
2020-2021	54%	33%	28%	41%
2021-2022	55%	36%	32%	40%

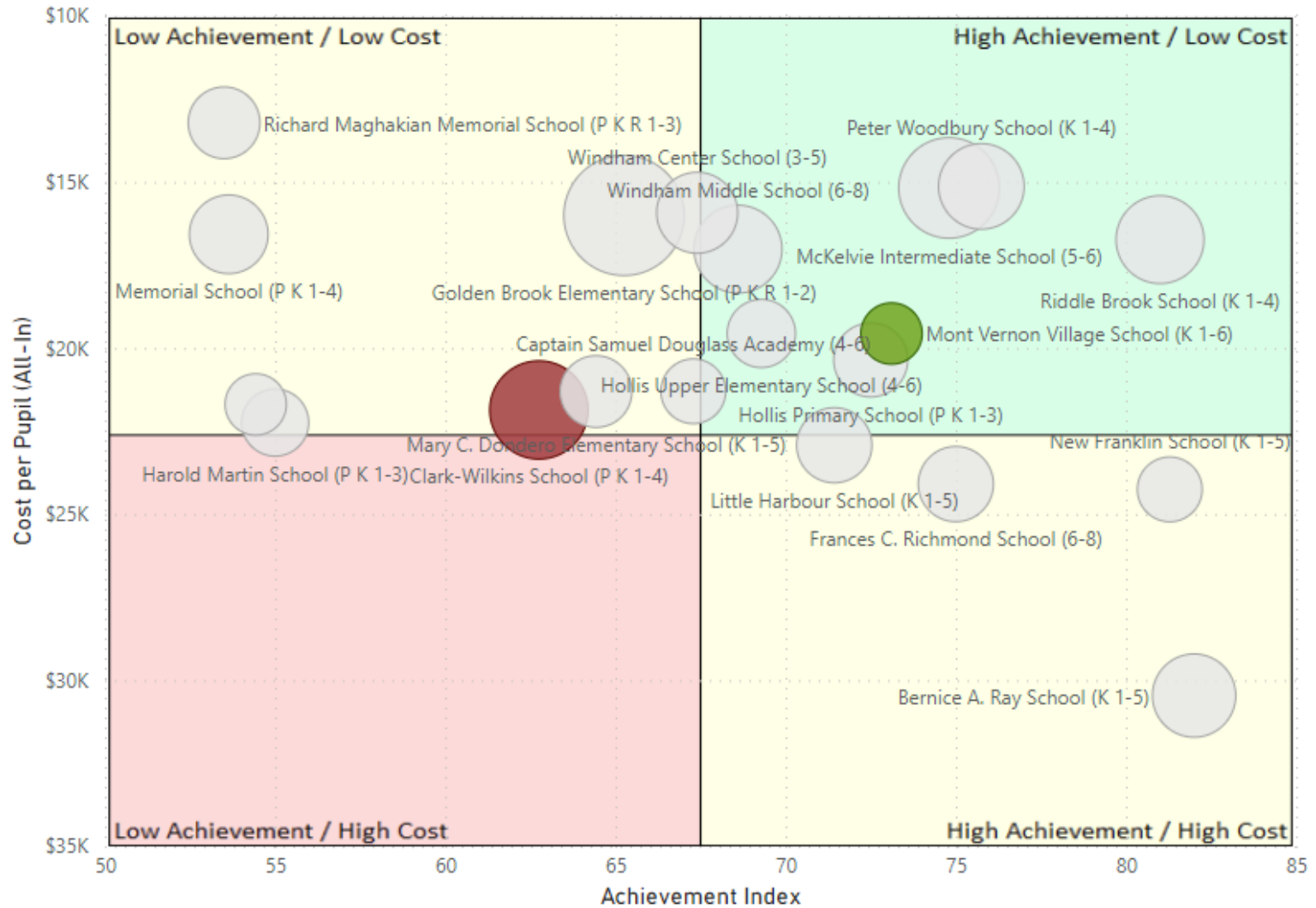
The number of students likely to be college-ready in either ELA or Math is low and continues to fall.

The number of students likely to be college-ready in both ELA and Math is low and continues to fall.

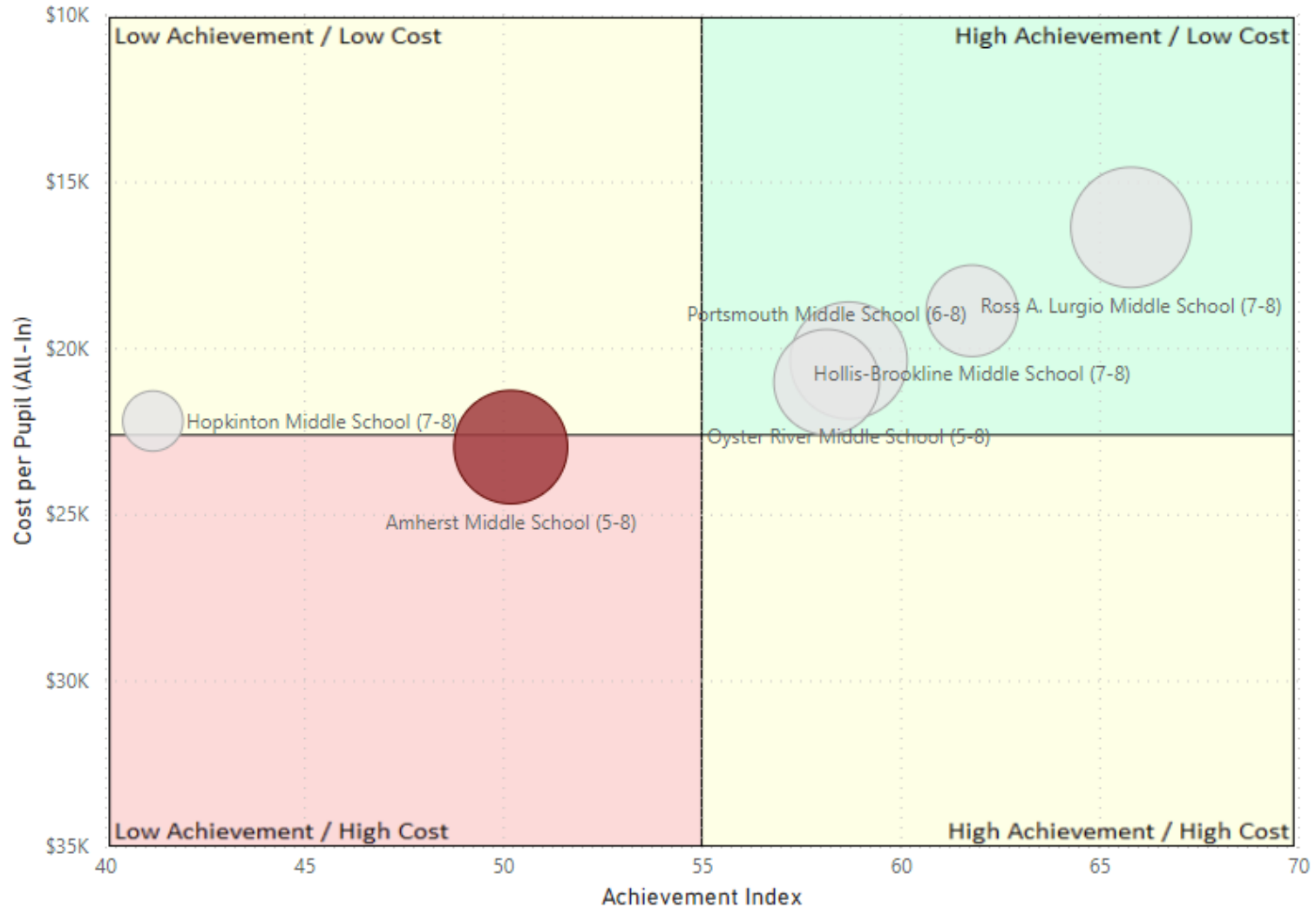
The number of students likely to be college-ready in neither ELA and Math is high and continues to rise.

Source NWEA Insights Report to SAU39

Educational Outcomes - Achievement vs Cost



Educational Outcomes - Achievement vs Cost



School Level

- Elementary
- Middle School**
- High School

Subject

- ELA**
- Math**
- Science**



Our Conclusion

- We see lower educational outcomes in both our elementary and middle schools compared with peer institutions.
- ASD expenses are not the highest among comparable schools, but they are high and trending higher.
- The educational value of an ASD K-8 education today is notably lower than it should be.
- It's hard to reconcile the current levels of ASD spending with its lower educational outcomes.
- What seems called for is immediate intervention and planning to increase educational outcomes and to manage costs better.



THE ASD WARRANT ARTICLES, OUR VOTES AND RATIONALE



ARTICLE 12: CLARK-WILKINS ADDITION, RECONSTRUCTION & RENOVATION

ASD W&M does not support this article by a vote of 1-6.



Our Analysis

- Our facilities have fallen into disrepair but can be reversed.
- The 25-year facility cost estimate for a new Wilkins School:
 - Cost with level principal: \$92M
 - Cost with level debt: \$103M
 - Level debt will cost taxpayers an extra \$11M.
- The school will cost the average homeowner \$800+ more per year for 25 years.
- The proposed new school may not solve all the space issues identified and may not be the best fiscal option.



Our Analysis

- Alternative space plans have not been sufficiently evaluated or costed, for example:
 - Retain Clark, add a smaller wing to Wilkins to serve the grades *currently* there, and replace the end-of-life capital equipment.
 - Reorganize grades in different buildings including the Annex.
- Mont Vernon may withdraw their 7th and 8th graders, which would create more space at the middle school.



Our Analysis

- The School Board has not consulted with the Planning Board regarding potential environmental impacts to one of the most sensitive water resource areas in Amherst.
- Nor have they explored with the Selectmen likely uses – and related costs – for repurposing the Clark School should it become decommissioned as a school.
- No independent traffic study has been done on the impact to the Historic District and Village, around which and through traffic will be funneled.
- Little improvement in student performance is expected even if the proposed facility is built.



Our Conclusion

Before residents are asked to choose a single high-cost, high-stakes construction investment:

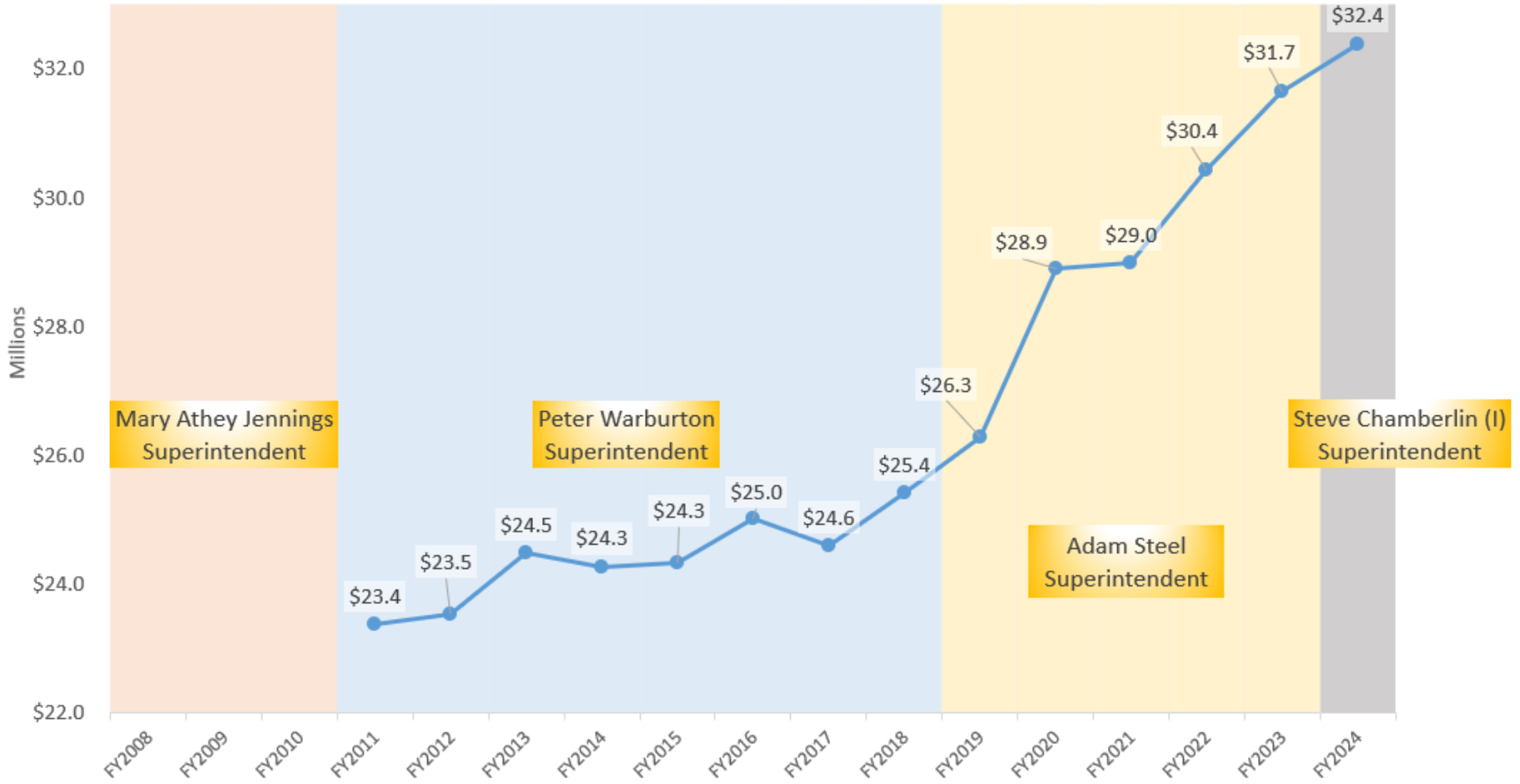
- Broader, evidenced-based discussions regarding educational practices, plans, and how buildings might best support them should be led by the incoming superintendent and involve everyone in the community.
- The complete costs of undertaking the new elementary school construction project including any costs to Clark should be calculated and presented to taxpayers.
- Other viable design options should be thoroughly explored, costed, and discussed with the community.



ARTICLE 13: ANNUAL OPERATING BUDGET

ASD W&M does not support this article by a vote of 0-7.

Proposed ASD Budgets by Fiscal Year

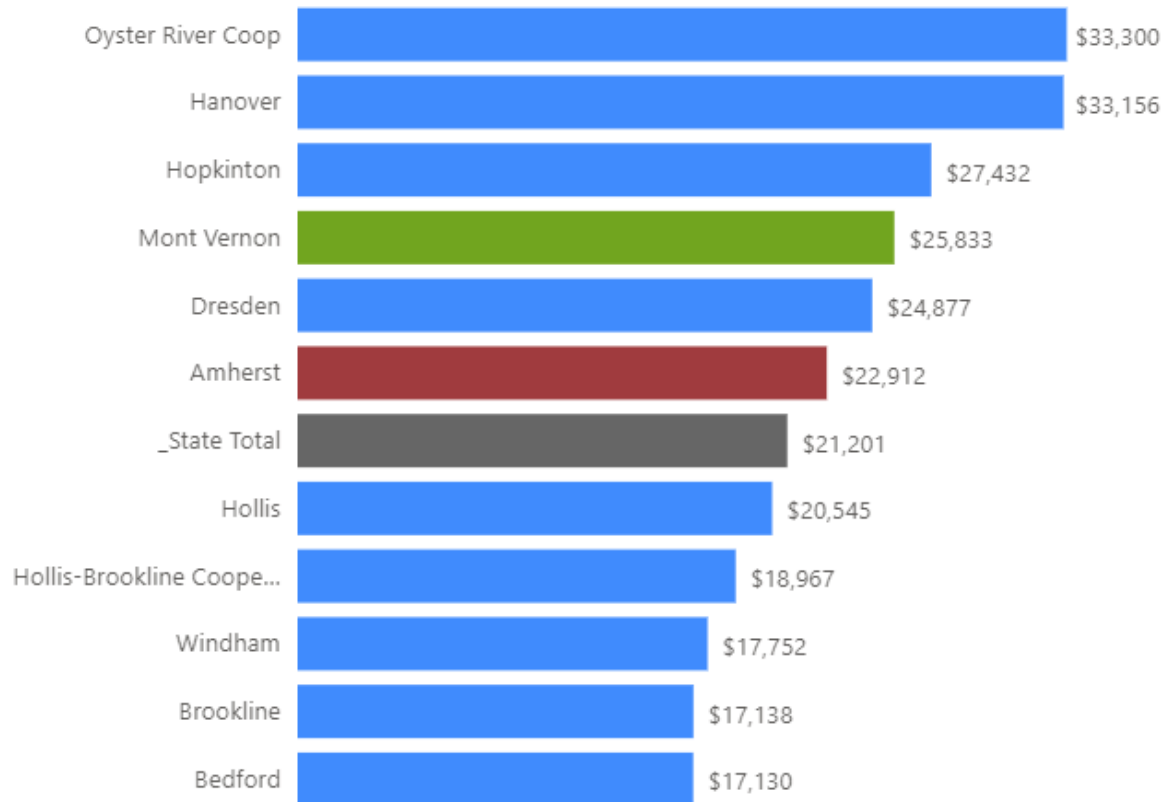


Our Analysis

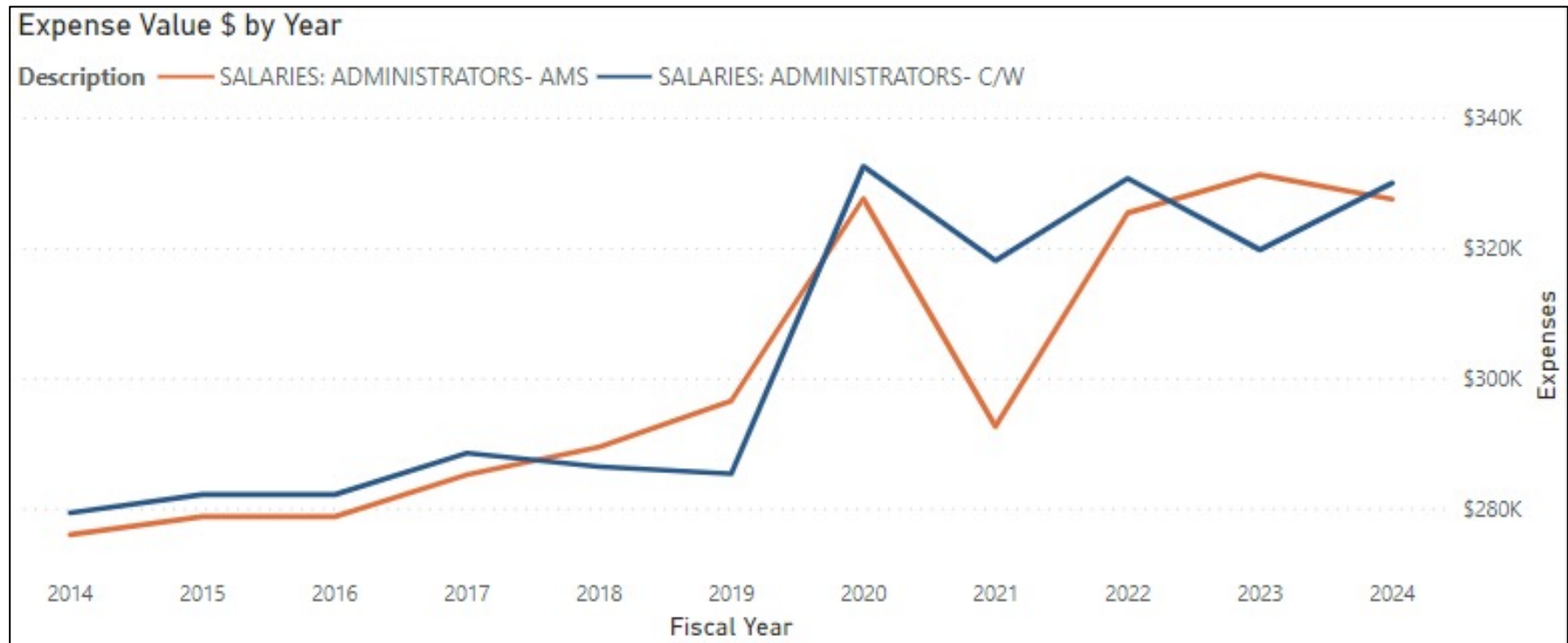
- The proposed budget isn't tied to a strategic *plan*. It is “business-as-usual” in the face of declining academic performance and unsustainable tax growth.
- Instead of going down, the proposed operating budget of \$32,399,486 reflects a *million-dollar increase*.
- Included in this budget is a *\$1.7 million allocation* of the “Brick School” administrative total budget of over \$3 million, which we believe to be high (Hollis-Brookline’s costs are *\$800K lower*).

CPP Ratio - ALL Expenses Included

2020_21

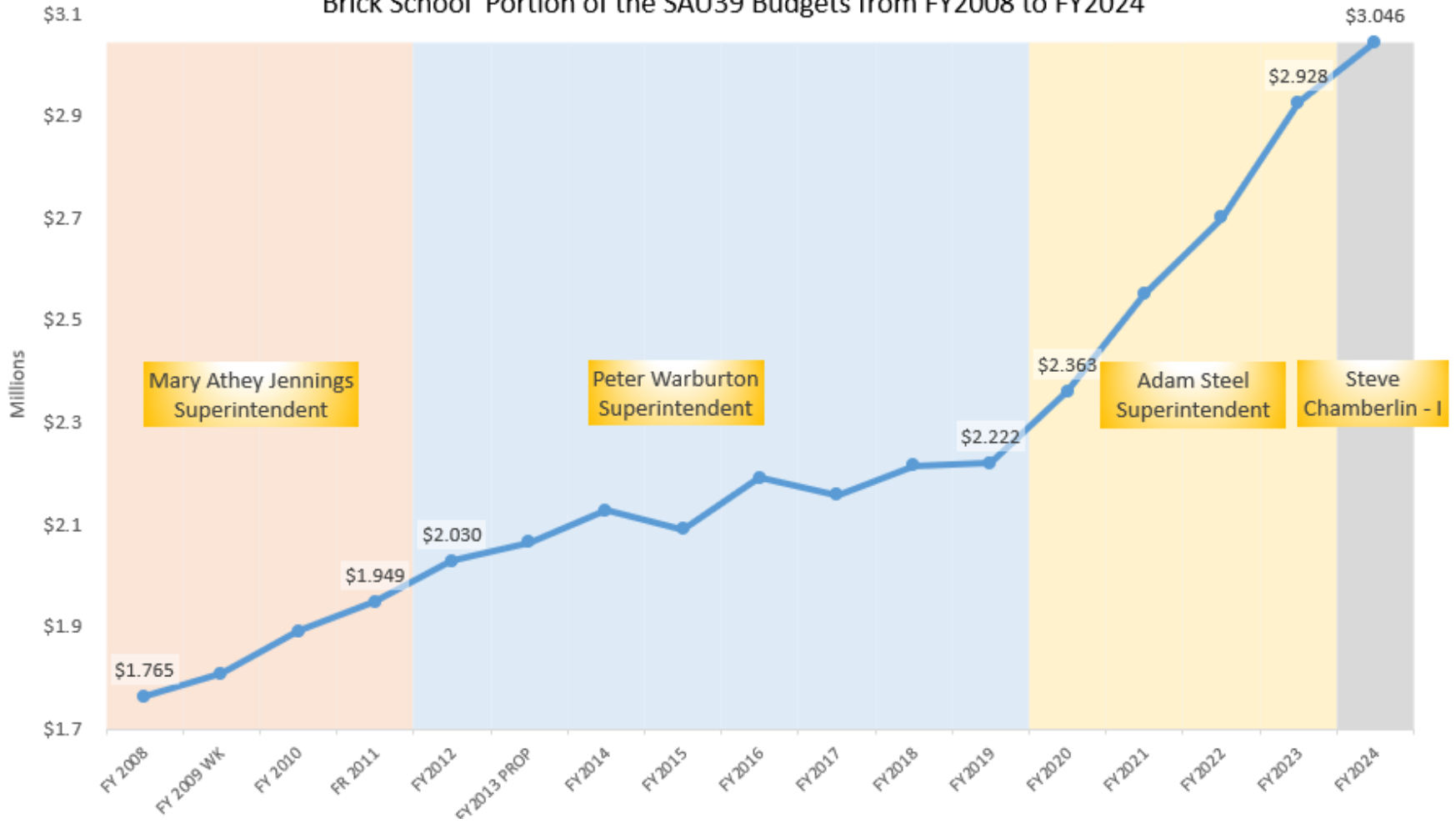


Administrative Costs *within* Our Schools



In 2019, the Amherst Middle School and Clark-Wilkins school saw sharp increases in total expenditures of administrator salaries. Not included here are health insurance and retirement costs.

'Brick School' Portion of the SAU39 Budgets from FY2008 to FY2024

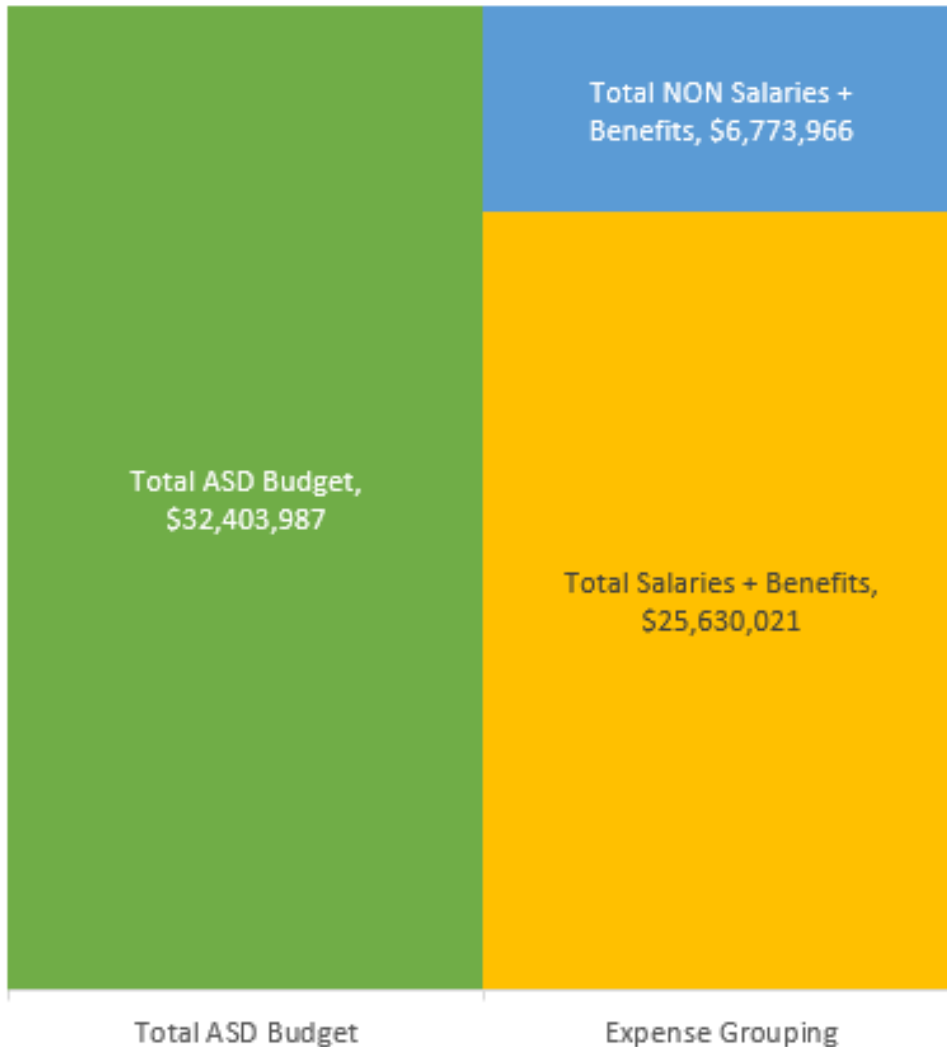




ARTICLE 14: THE AEA COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT

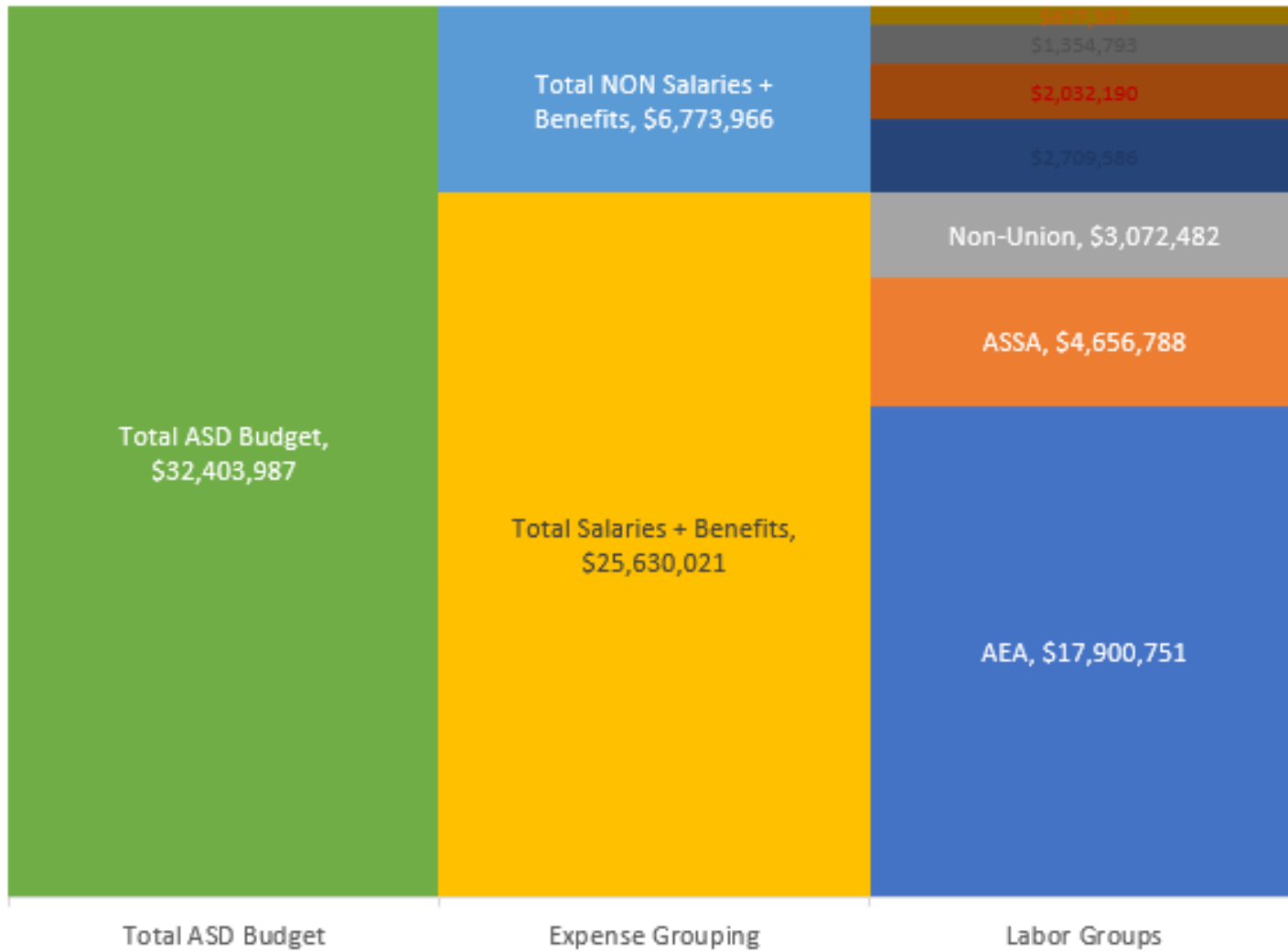
ASD W&M does not support this article by a vote of 3-4.

ASD 2024 (Draft-3) Budget Expenses



Nearly 80% of the Budget; Salaries and Benefits; Teachers, Support Staff and Administration

ASD 2024 (Draft-3) Budget Expenses



Nearly 80% of the Budget; Salaries and Benefits; Teachers, Support Staff and Administration

Consolidated ASD Salary Schedules by MIN Salary

(Descending Starting Salary)

Consolidated Teacher Salary Schedules



ASD salaries rank around the middle of all the comparable districts for entry level (BA) salaries.

Consolidated ASD Salary Schedules by MAX Salary

(Descending Ending Salary)

Consolidated Teacher Salary Schedules



But, ASD salaries at the upper end rank among **the highest** of comparable districts --second only to Hanover



Benefits are High

- “The term "teacher" is defined as all regularly salaried classroom teachers, librarians, speech therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, guidance counselors and nurses.”
- Taxpayers pay anywhere from 84% to 93% of health and medical insurance for AEA members.
- AEA members get early retirement payouts of upwards of \$100K or more.
- Those payouts also drive up their retirement funds which get paid by taxpayers, if not the state.

AEA Recent Retirement Payouts

AEA Retirees	FY18 Retiree Cost	FY19 Retiree Cost	FY20 Retiree Cost	FY21 Retiree Costs	FY22 Retiree Costs
Retiree 1	\$4,659.93	\$33,425.27	\$6,267.48	\$82,934.09	\$14,979.16
Retiree 2	\$34,861.54	\$19,967.25	\$97,373.80		\$32,729.09
Retiree 3	\$30,628.17	\$89,442.19	\$74,155.97		\$31,012.69
Retiree 4	\$21,905.38	\$75,336.69	\$74,741.02		\$74,927.41
Retiree 5	\$22,301.63	\$57,641.27	\$82,424.11		\$67,854.55
Retiree 6	\$74,333.18	\$95,012.40	\$88,885.20		\$40,057.54
Retiree 7	\$73,635.50		\$71,103.24		\$94,149.20
Retiree 8	\$85,161.89		\$55,933.14		
Retiree 9	\$86,731.35				
	\$434,218.57	\$370,825.07	\$550,883.96	\$82,934.09	\$355,709.64

Our Analysis

- We acknowledge the challenging environment in which teachers have operated for the past several years, and we applaud the proposed changes to the bargaining agreement.
- But, more cost reduction is needed here, because almost \$18 million (55%) of the overall ASD budget is driven by this AEA contract alone.
- That said, instead of reducing costs, this proposed AEA contract *increases* costs by:
 - \$691,834 in 2024,
 - \$648,309 in 2025, and
 - \$640,399 in 2026.
- This will increase baseline costs by \$2 million *in addition* to the million-dollar increase proposed in the operating budget.



Our Analysis

- If the AEA contract increases costs, then cost-cutting must come from the remaining 45% of the budget, which includes:
 - support staff,
 - non-union personnel, and
 - non-personnel costs.
- Such a narrow focus may either forestall meaningful cost-cutting or risk unanticipated degradation of those activities.



ARTICLE 15: SPECIAL ONE-TIME MEETING

ASD W&M supports this article by a vote of 4-3.



Our Analysis

- Since the voters will have spoken in March, some W&M members see no need for taxpayers to incur the costs of a special warrant, deliberative session, and election in which fewer voters are likely to weigh in on what was already decided upon by a greater number of voters.
- Conversely, if the AEA contract is voted down, this meeting could be a mechanism whereby the School Board and union could find a way to provide some additional compensation to teachers until the next contract is renegotiated.



ARTICLE 16: THE ASSA COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT

ASD W&M supports this article by a vote of 7-0.



Our Analysis

- W&M very much appreciates the sustained efforts of members of the Amherst Support Staff Association (ASSA) to provide high quality services across our schools and believes the elements of this article deserve strong public support.



ARTICLE 17: SPECIAL ONE-TIME MEETING

ASD W&M does not support this article by a vote of 2-5.



Our Analysis

- It is our hope that this meeting is not necessary because article 16 passes.



**ARTICLE 18: \$605K CONTRIBUTION
TO THE ASD MAINTENANCE
EXPENDABLE TRUST**

ASD W&M supports this article by a vote of 7-0.



Our Analysis

- We are upset that ASD buildings have fallen into such disrepair.
- It is especially disturbing that persistent roof leaks in AMS have not been corrected for several years. These leaks, which were discussed by the Board as early as 2017, continue to damage the facility and disrupt activities every time it rains.
- The current maintenance capital reserve fund has \$1.3 million in it. While we believe that normal repairs and maintenance should be covered by the operating budget, we unanimously agree that an additional \$605K be added to the reserve fund to address these dire needs.



Our Analysis

- W&M has no say over where this money might be spent, but we believe that the AMS leak problem should be addressed immediately.
- Going forward, the capital reserve fund should be used for unplanned and emergency issues, and normal repairs should be covered in the budget.
- This is more likely possible going forward because the SAU now has a competent, thoughtful facilities director who has crafted a sensible multi-year facilities maintenance plan.



THE BIGGER PICTURE: TIME-OUT



Key Takeaways

- W&M Committees have historically been encouraged to look at year-over-year proposed *budget* changes.
- That keeps everyone's focus on the trees (budget line-items) rather than the broader educational landscape.
- Our analyses have verified some uncomfortable facts:
 - Our educational **outcomes are declining** and falling short of our peer communities.
 - Our **costs are significantly higher** than our peer schools.
 - **Annual *budgeting* has been a poor substitute for *strategic governance*.**



Key Takeaways

- Our entire community should support the new incoming superintendent in creating a unified and strategic educational plan that:
 - Clarifies what type of education our students need,
 - Ties educational theory to curricula, materials, teaching, and grading approaches,
 - Measures and conveys educational and fiscal progress, and
 - Ensures that our facilities effectively support the educational approaches taking place inside them.



AMHERST'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AT A CROSSROADS

How the Amherst School District's Warrant Articles
May Shape Amherst for Years to Come

ASD Ways & Means Committee

March 2023