

**ASD Ways & Means Committee
Report and Recommendations on the FY24 Warrant Articles**

January 2023

Introduction

When a highly reputable education assessment firm (NWEA) forecasts that only a third of current ASD K-8 students are likely to graduate from high school college-ready in *both* English Language Arts and Math, and that over a third of all current students will *not* be college ready in *either*, it's no longer time for business as usual. When it becomes clear that peer communities are doing a better job of educating their students for millions of dollars less on an All-In Cost-Per-Pupil basis, it's no longer time for business as usual in ASD. What is called for is systemic change to markedly improve our educational and financial outcomes through stronger planning, implementation, and oversight.

Committee Members

The following members were appointed by ASD Moderator Nate Jensen: Dwayne Purvis, Chair; Jeff Candito, Vice Chair; Greg Fritz, Secretary; Mike Akillian; Rick Barnes; Steve Frades; Mozammel Husainy; and Marilyn Gibson, Alternate.

W&M Mission

The ASD 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.

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. This is that report.

Collaborative Engagement

W&M worked closely with representatives from the SAU including Steve Chamberlin, Interim Superintendent; Amy Facey, Business Manager; and others, along with representatives from the ASD School Board including Tom Gauthier, Board Chair; and Victoria Parisi, Vice Chair. Besides engaging with these people directly in our working meetings, we asked for and received a wide variety of financial and academic performance information from them. We very much

appreciate their cooperation, responsiveness, and transparency. While we did not always agree on positions, our interactions were respectful, professional, and collaborative.

We were also pleased to be able to engage with committed professionals across the administration and schools in budget subcommittee meetings through which we discussed spending patterns and requests covering hundreds of line items.

Analyses & Public Communication

As part of our preparation to address the warrant articles, we conducted several different foundational analyses, the results of which we have published in separate reports that can be found on the ASD [W&M webpage](#) on the SAU39 website. These include: a multi-year assessment of the educational value of an ASD K-8 education along with cost analyses on spending patterns in ASD and the SAU, and an analysis of the proposed new construction of the Wilkins School.

Our Votes and Recommendations

Article 12: Clark-Wilkins Addition, Reconstruction & Renovation

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

- Committee members unanimously agree that space issues exist at Clark-Wilkins, which should be addressed. However, most do not believe that a strong case has been made for the town to spend \$118 million (\$54 million construction costs plus interest) to solve them.
- We also feel that the ASD Board hasn't provided detailed cost/benefit analyses of alternate plans that could also address space needs more cost efficiently. For example, one option could be to retain Clark and add a wing onto Wilkins to provide the space that is lacking and to upgrade all the systems to accommodate the larger space. Another option that doesn't appear to have been thoroughly considered is using space that already exists at the Souhegan Cooperative Annex building to redistribute grade levels in a different configuration to relieve space issues generally. Because it is not possible to conclude that the current proposed plan is the best available option, W&M believes that the Board has more homework to do prior to asking for an informed vote.
- It seems design plans haven't accounted for special services growth or volatility. Alternatively, enrollment growth may have been over-estimated for the general student population, which could lead to a building that is larger and more expensive than it need be. Thus, more work needs to be done to present these alternative choices and general related costs to the community as is typically done in these matters.
- An alternate view of this article is that underfunding of maintenance needs for an aging building with critical systems that are end-of-life have forced Amherst residents to consider radical action. The current proposal is the only one that has been vetted and can be acted upon in the shortest amount of time. While the project is not likely to receive state aid to offset the cost of the article, ASD maintains a relatively

favorable ranking of 7 out of 17 on the New Hampshire Department of Education priority list of schools should the funds become available.

Article 13: The Operating Budget

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

- The proposed budget isn't tied to targeted outcomes or to a strategic plan. This budget request represents a "business as usual" spending request, even in the face of declining academic performance and unsustainable tax growth.
- If ASD were operating close to the fiscal efficiency of peer communities such as Hollis or Bedford, it's budget would be millions of dollars lower than it is today. Rather than proposing a budget that decreases, the Board is proposing a budget with a *million-dollar increase*.
- The administration says that their budgets are tight. However, at present, they have an unspent fund balance of almost \$800K and are proposing that \$605K of that balance be used to increase the maintenance reserve trust by \$605K. This raises the question of just how tight these budgets really are.
- There is \$1.7 million dollars in ASD's proposed operating budget for its share in underwriting SAU (Brick School) proposed \$3 million budget – a budget that has increased significantly in recent years even as the academic outcomes driven by the SAU have declined. This does not represent the educational value residents deserve. The school boards have chosen not to let the voters decide on the SAU budget as a separate article, as does SAU41 that serves Hollis and Brookline, for example. We believe that the SAU budget should be subject to the same voter review and approval as the other school budgets.

Article 14: The AEA Collective Bargaining Agreement

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

- This article, which covers the collective bargaining agreement with the Amherst Educators Association (AEA), generated significant deliberation amongst the W&M members. We unanimously value and support our teachers. We also acknowledge the challenging environment in which teachers have operated for the past several years:
 - A lack of real strategic plans and targeted academic outcomes and metrics by the Board and administration which could provide focused direction for teachers.
 - An array of unnecessary educational experimentation that has adversely affected students and teachers, and which should have been constrained through effective governance and oversight.
 - The challenges of contending with COVID and the many needs of parents and students in dealing with the crisis.
 - An SAU administration whose previous management style turned increasingly autocratic (e.g., teachers threatened with dismissal if they spoke to anyone outside

of the schools) at a time when more transparent, community-wide collaboration was called for.

- At the same time, we believe that ASD's high educational costs are excessive and must come down. That effort will be thwarted if the AEA contract is not as assiduously reviewed and trimmed as other cost drivers. The reason for this is, of the current \$32 million spent on ASD schools, almost \$18 million (55%) is driven directly by the AEA contract alone.
- Amherst teachers are among the highest compensated in the state, comparable to Hanover. We support and value excellence in teaching as the foundation for excellent academic outcomes. (We note that Hanover's academic performance is tops in the state and view them as an aspirational district.)
- We unanimously support the proposed contract changes that better redistribute the salary schedule to compensate lower-paid teachers more equitably, and we certainly applaud the increase in learning time covered by the proposed contract. If the article is defeated, these changes may not go into effect until a new contract is ratified.
- 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 and will increase baseline costs by \$2 million. These increases are *in addition* to the million-dollar increase proposed in the operating budget. If the net result of approving the AEA contract is a material *increase* in costs, then any measurable cost-cutting will have to 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.

- 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: ASSA Collective Bargaining Agreement

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

- 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.

- 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.

- We are upset that ASD buildings have been allowed to fall 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. 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.