

## **Amherst School Board Response to Ways & Means Reports**

Amherst School Board is appreciative of the effort and commitment of the members of the ways and means committee during the FY24 budget cycle. We understand the importance of having another set of eyes reviewing budgets and providing thoughts and insight from a different perspective. However, the board is producing this report to provide further context and nuance to the reports issues by the ways and means.

Before diving into specific reports, it is very difficult to compare one district's or town's spending to another, for several reasons, including overall student population; single-town districts versus school administrative units like SAU 39; quality, age and number of facilities; superintendent office structure; programs offered; board goals and initiatives; and more.

We will use this space to provide more clarity and reasoning behind some of our ballot initiatives, and we will highlight some of the work being done to improve the district overall. This does not include every article on the ballot, only the articles where we don't see eye to eye on the results produced in ways and means' reports.

If you have further questions, please contact Amherst School Board at [ASB@sau39.org](mailto:ASB@sau39.org).

Respectfully,  
Tom Gauthier, chair  
Victoria Parisi, vice chair  
Terri Behm  
Josh Conklin  
Jason White

## **Voter's Guide Report Summary Points**

### **Article 12 – School Bond Project**

- A more detailed summary of facilities can be found below.
- This has been a major focus of the board, in conjunction with the Joint Facilities Advisory Committee (Amherst Building & Grounds), and administration for nearly five years.
- After last year's joint Clark/Wilkins-Amherst Middle School bond project was voted down, the board came back with an elementary-only project. This will solve space constraints throughout the district, replace mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems at the elementary school, and leave us with capital reserve funding to plan the long-term upgrade of the middle school over time.
- Special services programming and staffing needs can vary wildly year to year. The new elementary school project includes ample special services space – for small group and one-on-one lessons while also providing space for occupational therapy and life skills.

- Each grade level has seven dedicated classrooms and there will be an additional three flex spaces to provide options for larger cohorts of students in a particular grade, or to use for special education programming.
- Though it isn't anticipated based on professional enrollment reports through the next ten years, the new building is designed to accommodate additional construction, unlike our current elementary schools.
- A detailed cost construction was produced by DEW/Banwell Architects for two plans – the one selected by the board as well as an elementary school that would have used the current Wilkins land as well as the upper field. Prior to these plans, cost of magnitude estimates were provided by the previous architect involved in the master planning process, Lavallee Brensinger Architects. The three estimates included maintaining the current buildings with upgrades to systems; providing a total renovation of Wilkins with an addition; and an option to build new. The latter two options were the ones that solved systems and space, and with costs being similar, it was decided a new facility would better solve the long-term needs of the district.
- Level debt vs. level principal. The board considered both options but went with level-debt for two primary reasons:
  - o Lower tax impact in the first ten years
  - o All residents in town, no matter when they move in, will invest the same for their usage of the school. This is true for folks living in town now, as well as those who move into the district in year 10, 15 or 23.

### **Article 13 – Proposed Operating Budget**

**Business as usual** – The board argues that it is not true that this budget creation was 'business as usual' for the district. There are specific initiatives and goals that went into the creation process. These include:

- Reading and literacy initiatives. The board, under interim superintendent Steve Chamberlin's guidance, made reading competency a major focus in this budget. Many of our students, especially in kindergarten through second grade, are below grade level in reading. This cannot be fixed overnight. If a student is not reading at grade level by fourth grade, they may never catch up. As such, this budget provides:
  - o Library assistant at Clark/Wilkins to make books available to students throughout the day.
  - o Reading specialist at Amherst Middle School
  - o Saint Anselm Fellow program. A new partnership with Saint Anselm College is in the budget to provide two full-time, certified teachers to work with students lagging in math and reading. These teachers are pursuing special education certifications and would provide 2600 hours of student learning at roughly \$20 per hour (\$50,000 total). This will not be implemented if the budget does not pass.
- New math curriculum. FY23 is the first year we are utilizing a new math curriculum piloted in FY22. FY24 will allow us to gain more insight into the impact on student learning and teacher performance.

- On-going building maintenance. While we placed a major facilities project on the ballot to replace Clark/Wilkins, we continue to use the facilities master plan to maximize cost-effective ways to maintain the current buildings. We are also continuing to implement a capital needs program with funding from a capital reserve fund. Utilizing the CRF, we are current planning phase one of a roof and unit ventilator replacement project to make AMS water-tight, which is expected to cost \$1.5 million over the summer.

### **Test scores**

- The board recognizes that state test scores do not meet our community standards.
- Contrastingly, we are not using them as the sole metric of educational value (a more detailed explanation on this point can be found below).
- Many colleges and universities are now dropping SAT/ACT requirements or minimizing the role they play in admissions. This is not to say they aren't interested in high-achieving students but that they are using a combination of metrics, including test scores, interviews, writing samples, etc.
- Going forward, we will be developing a complete set of metrics to analyze educational value and student and teacher performance in conjunction with SAU leadership, particularly Steve Chamberlin and new superintendent Mike Berry. This was discussed at our February board meeting.

**Cost Per Pupil (CPP)** – This measure of dividing the budget by the number of students is an easy way to attempt to decipher the cost of educating each student. The following is a list of examples – albeit not a fully comprehensive list – of some of the flaws with this simple equation.

- The state of New Hampshire says CPP is not a valid comparative tool. There are many reasons for this, ranging from urban to rural districts, transportation, special services, etc.
- As indicated in the ways and means report analyzing DOE-25 budget forms, Amherst's budget 'buckets' are in line with the percentages other districts spend in similar categories such as regular education, special services, transportation, administration, etc. We have a larger percentage in some categories and a smaller percentage in others, but there are no outliers where we are spending drastically more or less in a comparable category.
- Student populations vary widely around us (Bedford, Hollis) and in districts we view as comparable districts (Bow, Windham, Hanover, et al.).
- Board goals. One of this board's goals is to produce small class sizes for more impactful learning environments and teacher-student interactions. By nature, this yields a larger staff than another comparable school might need if their focus is not the same.
- Facilities. The age and number of facilities impacts this line item. We have old buildings which need a lot of maintenance. Our director of facilities has brought immense value and cost savings to this process with his financial budgeting, maintenance planning, and hiring of in-house experts in various categories like HVAC and electrical work. Additionally, we operate three buildings pre-K through 8, which means a loss of efficiencies in staffing, systems and parts, etc.

- This board is also committed to providing in-house special education. This commitment is legal, as we need to provide an education for *all* students, but it is also moral as students learn best in their home schools with their friends and peers. This means we require more space and more staffing to meet these needs. As such, our special services bucket is larger than comparable districts and it routinely represents our largest budget line-item increase. It should also be noted that educating students in-district saves millions each year compared to tuition and transportation for out-of-district placement.

### **Article 17 – Collective Bargaining Agreements**

Amherst Education Association (AEA) – This is a proposed three-year deal after a four-year agreement was voted down at the polls in March 2022. Ways and means is correct that a new agreement with teachers increases costs. They are also correct that staffing makes up the largest portion of our budgets. With both of those items being true, you cannot offer wage increases – no matter how moderate or wild – without increasing costs. *That* math equation doesn't work. In this new agreement, there are some major wins for the students, families, district and taxpayers.

- The salary scale has been leveled out and the jump step – the final step in a vertical scale for a teacher – has been eliminated. Each step is 3-3.2% (compared to 2-5% in the previous version), and there are no more 10-13% single year increases due to the jump step.
- We have added significant time to the calendar for students and teachers.
  - There is a full educational day added beginning in year two.
  - There is the equivalent of two educational days picked up with the cancellation of six late start days over years two and three of the contract.
  - New teachers will spend three extra days of professional development with district leadership before the school year begins starting in the fall of 2023.
  - All teachers have an additional development day added to the calendar before the school year begins in both years two and three of the contract.
- Amherst vs. Hollis comparison. If this contract does *not* pass, you can see an example of what this means financially for a young teacher when compared to Hollis in FY 24.
  - Amherst teacher – third year in the district, still on step 1 of the ladder with a salary of \$41,717.
  - Hollis teacher – third year in the district, advanced to step 3 of the salary schedule with a salary of nearly \$50,000.
  - This \$9,000 difference is a lot in one year but means much more over the course of a lifetime of earnings. This makes hiring and retaining young, quality teachers very difficult.

### **Article 18 – Capital Reserve Fund**

- Budgetary overestimates. Ways and means points out that having enough money for a \$605,000 deposit into our facilities CRF means that we are likely overestimating our budget. This is not an accurate depiction of unassigned fund balance (or surplus) in any given budget year. We are placing on the ballot an article to fund the facilities CRF with \$605,000 from this year's end-of-year unassigned fund balance. When you look at the

details, our 'surplus' is not strictly from over-budgeted expenses. Estimates right now – and they will be refined as we get closer to July 1 – are for a surplus of \$775,000. This will come from a mixture of leftover, unused expenses plus revenue.

- Last year, we put \$650,000 into the CRF. This money came out of a pool of roughly \$1.2 million, only \$302,000 of which was unspent budgetary funds. The other \$900k+ was revenue.
- Normal repairs are included in our extensive facilities plan. For example, we have been patching roof leaks at AMS for many years. However, that part of the roof is over 50 years old and small repairs aren't enough any longer. This is why we are implementing phase one of our roof and unit-ventilator project.
- The board does NOT consider a roof and unit ventilator replacement project as 'normal' maintenance. By putting phase one of this project (and others like it) at an anticipated cost of roughly \$1.5 million into our regular budget, the fluctuations in operating budget become wild year-over-year. Tax stabilization is a priority when planning these projects, hence the funding and planning for the CRF.

### **Further Detailed Analysis**

#### **Educational Value Analysis report**

This report by ways and means primarily uses standardized test scores weighed against the budget to determine the value of an Amherst education. While test scores are an important metric, there are various published resources warning against using test scores as the **sole** data point.

Throughout educational history, there has been a desire, rightfully, to measure outcomes and the quality of an education. In 1949, Ralph W. Tyler wrote in his book *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, "However, there are a great many other kinds of desired behaviors which represent educational objectives that are not easily appraised by paper and pencil devices" (107).

So, what do people want public education to provide that cannot be assessed by paper and pencil tests, and what damage does focusing so much attention on standardized cause? According to George Wood's essay in the book *Many Children Left Behind*, "Parents and communities want schools where students are engaged, use their minds well, and yes, are even happy. Surveys of parents are clear; they want their children to be safe, to develop positive attitudes, to learn to be responsible citizens. A measure of school health would take into account all of this, and a richer sense of academic achievement (including samples of student work and demonstrations of competency)" (49).

Standardized tests are not good measures of such educational objectives. In fact, an emphasis on test scores causes harm and damages the educational process. Diane Ravitch, former assistant secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush, wrote in the introduction of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, "Standardized tests have their place in assessing educational achievement, but teaching to the test is corrupting the learning process. To begin, a narrow-minded focus on improving reading and math scores has led school

systems to cut back on the arts, the humanities (social studies, history, and literature), and physical education. Therefore, some of the very subjects research indicates are important to long-term success are cut to cater to test scores.”

Other evidence focusing on tests is harmful to education or an inappropriate measure:

- "The Committee on Appropriate Test Use of the National Research Council stated in an authoritative report in 1999 that 'tests are not perfect' and 'a test is not an exact measure of a student's knowledge or skills.' Because test scores are not an infallible measure, the committee warned, 'an educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score'" (Ravitch 153).
- "When faced with demands to satisfy a single measure, people strive to satisfy that measure but neglect the other, perhaps more important goals of the organization" (Ravitch 161).

The ways and means report analyzed scores from the district’s results of Northwest Alliance for Education (NWEA) tests, as well as state of New Hampshire SAS tests. In regard to NWEA testing, the following is NWEA’s position on how to use their scores:

- "NWEA data coaching starts by helping you analyze a wide range of local data, including student records, examples of student work, and results from different types of assessments."

What role can standardized tests play as part of a larger portfolio of data? Standardized tests such as NWEA are helpful when looking at individual student's growth. How they are or are not improving is a helpful data point to analyze. According to the most recent Insights Report provided to SAU 39 by NWEA, all grades who take NWEA testing have average to above average growth with the exception of one grade. Therefore, our students are making academic gains according to growth data.

**Conclusion:** With all of that said, this board realizes that test scores play a part in evaluating an education. Ways and means also concludes in their report that test scores are the most readily available and easily comprehended metric to analyze education outcomes for ASD. The report adds that other districts have additional metrics that Amherst does not utilize. In light of this, ASB will work with interim superintendent Steve Chamberlin and new superintendent Mike Berry (July 1, 2023) to develop and refine a comprehensive metric system – that *includes* test scores – to analyze the quality of education in Amherst.

## **Facilities**

At the ASD Deliberative, the ASD Ways and Means Committee questioned the cost estimates that have been acquired throughout this project.

In 2020, as part of the district-wide master planning work with Lavallee Brensinger Architects (LBA), three cost estimates (order of magnitude costs) were presented for the elementary school project and three cost estimates (order of magnitude costs) were presented for the

middle school project. These costs were presented by LBA with Harvey Construction as their selected cost estimator.

By analyzing the initial cost for a renovation/addition and for a new building, the final cost estimates (order of magnitude costs) for the two options were less than two million dollars apart. The final cost estimate (order of magnitude cost) for a full renovation of Clark and Wilkins with an addition at Wilkins to support programming needs was \$64,500,000 compared to the cost estimate (order of magnitude cost) for a new building at \$66,000,000. The advisory committee, administration, and board analyzed the differences between these two options. With a price difference of less than two million dollars, the direction to build a combined elementary school was selected for a variety of reasons. Among the reasons are simplest construction phasing causing the least disruption to the education of students, the working environment of staff, and the local community, the potential for the most energy efficient facility, and the consolidation to one elementary school site for efficiencies gained. The detailed costs of this option were provided before the Amherst School District 2021 Bond Hearing took place.

In spring of 2021, Banwell Architects was selected as the architect of record and DEW Construction as the construction manager after a thorough request for proposal/qualification process. From here, the direction remained for a new building for elementary and a renovation at the middle school. Banwell and DEW provided design and cost estimates for several designs for the elementary school consolidation project and a renovation at the middle school.

In March 2022, these projects were presented to the Amherst voters on the ballot. Over the last year, the direction of new construction for elementary and renovation for the middle school has not significantly changed. The elementary school programming was reviewed, and cost estimates were updated. The middle school projects will be remedied in a piecemeal fashion rather than a one time, whole-school renovation.

The board is confident in the direction of the elementary school project that has been selected. The cost of renovation of the two elementary school sites and an addition would be comparable to building new but would impact students for a longer period of time; as such, the board has not changed direction while working with Banwell and DEW since spring of 2021. For this reason, there is no detailed cost of the option to utilize an addition to meet space needs.

What has been done are cost estimates (order of magnitude costs) from Banwell for the second design that they provided for review prior to the selection of the conceptual design presented to the community today. Because taxpayer dollars are finite, the requests that the board and administration make of the architect and construction manager are specific to projects that are selected rather than all options. This is a deliberate, fiscally responsible way to spend funds.

Throughout the last year, the future direction for facility improvements dependent on the vote regarding Warrant Article 12 has been discussed. The discussions focus on the fact that the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems are going to require costly replacement per the

capital needs assessment and the elementary and middle schools are both operating over 90-95% capacity impacting the delivery of curriculum, amongst other concerns.

It is the belief that if the community will not support a new building, it is unlikely that they will support a renovation at Clark, renovation at Wilkins, and a permanent structure addition for 2.3% less, based on the initial order of magnitude costs. For that reason, the district's funds have been spent both directly and indirectly on researching the cost of renovation with the addition of temporary portables to augment space as the secondary option.

For this situation, a more detailed cost, beyond order of magnitude cost, was completed for a renovation of the two elementary school sites. Construction estimates will need to be updated if this direction is pursued after the March 2023 vote, simply because time has passed since its creation. The order of magnitude cost in 2020 was \$23,200,000. In February of 2022, the detailed, estimated cost for the items listed in the capital needs assessment for Clark and Wilkins was \$27,974,492. Adding a 4% construction escalation for the year since the estimate, this estimate cost is \$29,093,472. In addition to this cost is the square footage identified in the programming document that is missing from the current space. This space would be located in temporary portables. At the time of the order of magnitude costing, the estimate for temporary portable space was \$168 per square foot. The programming has been analyzed since 2020 and will continue to be analyzed, if necessary.

Temporary portables would be required to meet programming needs at Clark, Wilkins, and Amherst Middle School. Based on the programming document, in 2022, it was determined that to accommodate the programming for classroom space Clark would require 3 temporary portable classrooms, Wilkins would require 9 new temporary portable classrooms including the replacement of the current 4 temporary portable classrooms that are quickly approaching the end of useful life, and Amherst Middle School would require 6 temporary portable classrooms. This does not solve for core space needs. The elementary schools are undersized by 70,000 square feet, including the space for fifth grade. This is not a small addition of portables. The current cost of temporary portables has been discussed with detailed estimates provided. For four temporary portable classrooms, the estimated cost to purchase is approximately \$1,500,000, with a useful life of 20-25 years. The estimated cost to purchase for 6 classrooms is \$2,800,000. With this estimate, the cost to purchase temporary portables for all needed programming space at Clark, Wilkins, and Amherst Middle School would be around \$9,000,000.

The total cost for the renovation and the portables would be \$38,093,472 (\$29,093,472 for the cost of renovation plus \$9,000,000 for the cost of portables). The cost estimate of renovating Clark, Wilkins, and using temporary portables is 70% of the cost of Warrant Article 12.

If awarded funding from NHDOE State Building Aid, the proposed project may receive a reduction and cost approximately \$41,000,000, by conservative calculation of \$13,000,000 award amount. If this is the case, the cost estimate of renovating Clark, Wilkins, and using temporary portables is 93% of the cost of Warrant Article 12.



The Amherst Building and Grounds subcommittee of JFAC, administration, and the Amherst School Board are ready to make decisions regarding the future facilities regardless of Warrant Article 12 passing and have positioned their work in this manner.