

School District Challenges

Challenges

In September, 2016, the Reading Public Schools released a document which informed the Community of the challenges facing our school district. The document described the challenges as follows:

1. Retaining and Attracting Staff
2. Developing well-balanced and prepared students for college, career, and life
3. Supporting teachers and administrators as we transition to more rigorous standards and curriculum
4. Continuing to improve our special education services and in district programs
5. Identifying long term space needs to address program changes
6. Remaining comparable and competitive with other towns and school districts

Below is a description of these challenges. Many of these challenges are not addressed in the FY19 School Committee's Recommended budget, but will be addressed in the override budget. These areas do need to be prioritized in future budgets if we are to remain a strong competitive school district for our students.

1. Retaining and Attracting Staff

Over the last four fiscal years, the Reading Public Schools has had to make \$2,636,364 in personnel and non-personnel reductions/offset adjustments to level service budgets. In the FY18 budget alone, there is a reduction of 10.9 positions (6.4 teachers) as part of an overall \$813,405 reduction from a level service budget. In addition, when reviewing the salary schedules of 30 comparable communities that our Municipal and school department uses for budgetary purposes, Reading is in the bottom half for teacher salaries and compensation. The lack of additional resources in clerical and mid-level supervisory support has led to an increased workload for our teachers and administrators in an era of increased expectations and accountability for education. This combination has led to an increase in staff leaving the district for other communities over the last few years for higher wages and benefits and decreased workload. Moreover, it has been more difficult to attract teachers to come to Reading. This past school year alone, four teachers who were offered positions in Reading declined our offer to teach in other districts for higher wages and benefits.

To support this challenge, we have seen a steady increase in the number of teachers who have resigned in the school district since 2010. During our exit interview process, teachers are indicating that they are leaving for a variety of reasons, including family situations, relocation, advancement in their career, and working closer to their home. However, we are also seeing an increase in teachers leaving because of the workload/demands of the position and the compensation/benefits we offer. Anecdotally, we have seen teachers resign from the Reading Public Schools and receive a 6-8% increase in pay and benefits for a similar position in another school district. We have also experienced situations where perspective candidates have been offered positions in our school district and have declined to take an offer in another district for higher wages and benefits.

It is critical that our district remain competitive in salaries, benefits, and working conditions with other districts. Each time a teacher leaves the district, there is not only a financial and administrative cost to recruit, train and mentor the new teacher, but more importantly, there is a negative cultural impact to a school, classroom, and students.

2. Developing well balanced and prepared students for college, career, and life

States and school districts across the country are at various stages of updating their math, literacy, and science curriculum, improving their instructional practices, and developing an assessment system that identifies what students are truly learning. Our students are learning more rigorous and challenging curriculum and our teachers are working extremely hard to stay current in the type of classroom instruction that addresses today's student.

All school districts are experiencing student challenges that did not exist 10 years ago. Students are facing a greater degree of peer pressure, social media, and societal pressures, at a time when they are expected to achieve at a higher level. These pressures on our students have led to an increased number of students who are being diagnosed with anxiety and depression which has led to an increased number of students who have been hospitalized. In the 2015 administration of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), we are seeing trends where 25% of RMHS students are feeling sad or hopeless two weeks in a row, 16% of RMHS students purposely injured themselves without the intention of killing themselves and 11% of RMHS students have seriously considered suicide. These pressures can also lead to an increase in risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, including the use of Opioids and other illegal substances. Recently, we have seen an increase the number of students who have been placed out of district for social emotional or behavioral health reasons. In addition, we are having a growing population of students who are struggling academically. To help address these needs, the Reading Public Schools has been putting into place different levels of supports and programs for students based on need. However, additional staffing is needed to provide those academic and social/emotional supports. If we are able to proactively address these challenges when a child is first struggling, it will help the student and potentially avoid more expensive interventions and supports (i.e. special education) at a later date.

One of the areas that we are not addressing adequately is health education. Unlike other school districts, the Reading Public Schools does not have a comprehensive health education program in Grades K-12. Currently, there are 10 lessons of health education per year in Grades 3-5, and semester courses in Grades 9 and 11. This year, we have increased the number of health education lessons at the middle school during the student's physical education/wellness classes and we will continue that trend in the future. A Grade 7 middle school health education course was eliminated due to budget reductions in 2013. A middle school health education program would focus on prevention and educate students on making good healthy decisions, improve peer relations, and understand how to live a healthy and productive lifestyle. It is important for students to have this foundation before reaching high school.

Finally, anecdotally, we are beginning to hear from some families that their children are not being accepted into their top college choices. When we have researched this concern, we are hearing that our students do not have access to as many Advanced Placement Courses as other school districts. Reading Memorial High School has one the lowest number of available Advanced Placement Courses in the region. In addition, we do not have the types of elective

courses available to our high school students that allow them to explore and go more into depth areas that will prepare them better for their college interests. The availability of Advanced Placement Courses and elective opportunities is a critical component in making students more competitive when they are applying to colleges and Universities and to better prepare them for their future choices. Additional staffing is needed to provide these courses.

3. Supporting teachers and administrators as we transition to more rigorous standards and curriculum

Giving teachers and administrators the time, support, and professional training is essential so that they are able to address the needs of today's students. As part of this support, it is important to maintain and update our current levels of technology hardware, training, and infrastructure so that teachers have the instructional tools in the classroom. Moreover, we need to continue to provide professional development time for teachers to learn new curriculum, update instructional practices, and have time to collaborate with each other so that there is consistency in learning experiences across all schools.

One area that is critical, but is currently a challenge in our district is the amount of administrative and supervisory support that is available for staff. On average, our building level administrators supervise and evaluate 47 staff at each of our schools. This ratio is much higher than our comparable communities and is a cause for concern because it does not allow our administrators to adequately help support teachers and other staff while managing the day to day operations of the school. Essentially, because of the lack of administrative support, Principals are forced to focus more on the day to day operations of the school and spend less time on continually improving the school. Ultimately, this affects student learning and success.

Most comparable school districts have these additional supports in the form of elementary assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, and curriculum directors. In FY15, which is the latest figures that we have from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), Reading is ranked 27th out of 30 comparable communities in per pupil expenditures for District and School Instructional Leadership. One of the school districts that was ranked below us, North Andover, recently added two K-12 curriculum coordinator positions, which will most likely rank them above us in a future ranking. In addition to providing supervision, these positions focus on curriculum coordination so that students in every classroom across the school district are receiving the same learning experiences by grade and subject area. In an era of increased accountability and expectations, school districts are recognizing the importance of these positions and the impact that they can have on students.

4. Continuing to improve our special education services and programs

In 2015, the Reading Public Schools had Walker Associates conduct a complete evaluation of our special education programs and services in the school district. As part of that report, there was a finding of increased administrative turnover and workload for the Director of Student Services and Team Chairs. The Director of Student Services currently oversees all of the Age 3-22 special education programs and services, special education transportation, English Language Learner services, Health Services, and Social Emotional Learning coordination. Additional support is needed in this area so that the Director's focus can be on improving special education programs and services throughout the school district. By strengthening our in district special education programs, we will be able to educate more of our special education students in district instead

of enrolling them in out of district placements. This has both a fiscal benefit for the community and an educational benefit for students as it will allow students to stay in their local school district with their peers in a more inclusive setting. For example, a student who is in the Compass Program (in district program for students with severe autism) will cost \$52,000 less per year than an out of district private special education program and \$17,000 less per year than a public collaborative program that service the same disability. By strengthening our in district special education programs, the savings that results from those investments can ultimately be used for all students in the district.

5. Identifying long term space needs to address program changes

The Reading Public Schools has had space constraints over the last several years due to programmatic changes and additions in special education, full day kindergarten, preschool and other program offerings. In addition to the special education program needs described above, there has been a growing demand for full day kindergarten and preschool. In the 2017-18 school year, 75% of our kindergarten students will be in tuition-based full day kindergarten. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, in the 2017-18 school year, 94.7% of all kindergarten students in Massachusetts public schools were enrolled in full day kindergarten. In addition, 80% of all Massachusetts School Districts now have tuition free full day kindergarten and that percent is increasing annually. Our space needs were partially addressed with the addition of six modular classrooms last year at the elementary level. These modular classrooms will provide much needed classroom space for at least 10-15 years. Unfortunately, the space needs continue to grow as we continue to strengthen our in district special education programs and more families are choosing full day kindergarten.

In addition, Killam Elementary School, which was built in 1969, is beginning to show its wear and tear and will need work done in the next five to ten years. Recently, The Town of Reading Water Department conducted water testing for lead in all of our schools. The lead in water test results have indicated that over 80% of the faucets at Killam are showing above lead levels in water of 15 parts per billion or greater. This is due to plumbing fixtures and pipes that contain high lead content. The only long term solution to solving the high lead content is to completely replace all of the plumbing in the building. In addition, Killam is the only school building in the district that has not had a renovation or new construction. It is anticipated that this could be a possible option to add additional classroom space in the district to accommodate these programmatic changes. A feasibility study in the next few years may provide sufficient information on how to move forward in this challenge.

6. Remaining comparable and competitive with other towns and school districts

Addressing each of the above challenges (1-5) will keep our school district comparable and competitive with area towns and school districts. As mentioned in Challenges 1 and 3, we need to become more comparable in salary, working conditions, and benefits to be able to retain and attract teachers and administrators. In addition, we need to keep our programs, curriculum, and learning experiences strong so that we can provide opportunities and options for our families so that they will send their children to the Reading Public Schools.

Final Thoughts

A significant amount of gratitude goes out to the Central Office Administrators, Principals, and Directors who worked tirelessly to develop a recommended FY19 budget that, in spite of the fiscal realities facing

our community, keeps the focus on our students. The decisions that were made to develop this budget looked at the priorities, both short term and long term, that our school district is facing and how we have to adapt to the challenges described above. Similar to FY18, we do not support the reduction of staff, however, given the fiscal realities, our options are limited and we had to prioritize reductions that long term had the least negative impact on our PreK-12 students, as well as, providing adequate support for teachers in training, materials, and supplies in the 2017-18 school year.

Our school district has a lot to be proud of and we see it each and every day in our classrooms. Our overall data is showing that Reading Public School students are performing above the state average on the latest state assessments. We are also beginning to see some positive downward trends in some of our key Youth Risk Behavior Data, including significant decreases in the use of cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana since 2005. This is due to our dedicated and hard-working teachers, administrators, and support staff who work tirelessly in the best interest of all of our students. In addition, we have an excellent working relationship with town officials who see education as one of the priorities of our community.

Earlier, we described the challenges that our school district is facing and obviously, we are concerned about the financial and human impact these reductions will have on our school district. We are very appreciative and value the financial support that our community has given to public education over the last several years. Unfortunately, our latest state financial data (FY16) shows that Reading ranks 295th out of 326 Massachusetts communities in per pupil spending. It is well documented that our community has a revenue challenge as we become more and more reliant on cash reserves each year to fund our budgets. It is to our town's credit that through mutual respect and collaboration, town boards have stretched our dollars to provide the quality education and services, of which Reading is so proud.

While of course a particular "per pupil expenditure" is not the point, nor a guarantee of educational excellence (for instance, there are many school districts where higher spending does not necessarily translate to greater student achievement), it's important to make clear that the objective is not the specific dollar amount—but rather a sustainability from year to year that is comparable to other communities in the state. For many years, Reading's per pupil expenditure was in the average to low average range for the state, and we were proud that we were still able to attain above average results. The significance in the state "per pupil" ranking is not any specific dollar amount but rather the yearly comparison to all the other communities in the state. As the drastic decline in the state ranking indicates however—dropping in the last decade from 232 to 295 with a low point of 305 (out of 326 communities), Reading has unfortunately not kept pace in sustainability with other communities in the commonwealth. In order to continue providing our students with the most effective programs and also to continue attracting/retaining excellent educators, this is clearly an issue that needs further attention as we move forward.

Our continuing decline in per pupil expenditure is beginning to have an impact on our school system, especially during the times of transition that our schools are currently facing. Over the last five years, the average budget increase has been 3.2%, however, expenses in health care costs, utilities, supplies, special education costs and compensation have come in at much higher increases. This leads to overall decreased funding for school services and programs. We are in the midst of tremendous educational change in our state and in our country with more rigorous curriculum frameworks, a next generation assessment system, and the expectation to make sure all students are college and career ready. We also need to address the areas mentioned earlier in behavioral health. During these times of transition, it is more important than ever to sustain our previous levels of support and to add resources to address

additional needs. In the upcoming school years we will need to continue to update our science and engineering curriculum, provide time and resources for teachers to implement these new curricula, continue to improve our special education services and programs, add more tutorial and social emotional support for struggling students, offer dedicated health education classes at our elementary and middle schools, increase our Advanced Placement course offerings at the high school and elective offerings at all levels, and update the High School Graduation requirements to help prepare our students for college and future opportunities. The resources necessary to move forward in these areas are not in the FY19 School Committee's Recommended Budget.

Equally important, we need to continue to attract and retain the best educators. Over the past few years alone educators left our district and took employment in another school district in the Metro Boston area for higher compensation, better benefits and improved working conditions related to caseload and paperwork. In addition, four candidates who were offered positions in our school district declined to accept our offer and accepted a position in another school district for higher compensation and benefits.

While the FY19 School Committee's Recommended Budget allows us to fund most of the core areas of our school district, other areas are affected, and financial constraints limit our ability to pursue many of the innovative programs, structures, and systems that we believe will make our students even more successful. The Reading Public Schools is at a crossroads when it comes to the amount of funding available and what we are able to do to continue to improve education in our district. While each district's per pupil spending might be impacted by varying needs, what is evident has been our inability to sustain what had been effective levels of services from year to year. What we are finding is that, in the last several years, we are losing ground, and finding it harder to compete with comparable communities. In FY15, the School Department needed to reduce a level service budget by \$285,000. In FY16 the School Committee's Recommended budget was reduced by \$849,620 from a level service budget. The FY17 Recommended budget had been reduced from the FY16 level service budget by \$658,193 and the FY18 Recommended budget was reduced by \$813,405 from the FY17 level service budget. As described in this FY19 School Committee's Recommended Budget, the gap is \$843,551.

In conclusion, our district will continue to stay focused on the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of our students. While we are proud of the fact that we are a district that is on the forefront in many areas, we have many challenges, described above, that lie ahead. The increasing accountability demands on public education and the needs of our students have increased significantly over the last five years and we need to identify additional resources and restructure some existing resources so that our teachers and administrators can continue to do the hard work necessary to improve student learning. We need resources to create more opportunities for teachers to collaboratively work together to share their work, and improve their practices, and to provide instructional coaching support so that teachers can see firsthand what it looks like in the classroom. The FY19 School Committee's Recommended Budget unfortunately, cannot reflect all of those priorities.

Although this is an uncertain budgetary time in our schools, we have an opportunity to make positive substantive changes. It is difficult work, but we are up to the challenge of providing the best learning experiences for our students. We are proud of the work that our teachers and administrators do every day to improve teaching and learning in our district. In addition, we have enthusiastic and respectful students who arrive to school every day eager to learn. This is a testament to our parents and our community who value the importance of education and the role that it needs to play in a community. There is no question that a major indicator of the quality of life for everyone in a community can be

measured by the quality of its schools and by a community's commitment to its children. In this way, the quality of a school district affects every single person in a community, and the Town of Reading is no exception.

We appreciate the support that we have received from the community in the past and we look forward to working with town officials during this budget process and in providing sustainable funding solutions for FY19 and beyond.