

LEXINGTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
Wednesday, September 12, 2007
Selectmen's, Town Hall
Burlington, Massachusetts

Present: Superintendent Paul Ash, School Committee Chair Tom Diaz, School Committee Members: Tom Griffiths, Helen Cohen. Minutes taken by Tom Diaz.

1. Call to Order and Introduction (Tom Diaz)

Mr. Diaz called this meeting to order at 10:05 a.m. in Burlington. The purpose was to meet town administrators and elected officials in Burlington, to learn about their methods of budgeting certain special education expenses.

Also attending from Lexington were Student Services director Linda Chase, Town Manager Carl Valente, Selectmen chair Jeanne Krieger, Appropriation Committee member Deborah Brown, and town budget officer Michael Young.

The meeting was conducted by Burlington's town administrator, Mr. Bob Mercier. Also present were a representative from the Burlington selectmen, the acting school Superintendent, Dr. James Picone, and school town budget administrators.

2. Discussion of Special Education Budgeting

The Burlington officials explained that in recent years, they have budgeted special education out of district tuitions and special ed transportation separately from the rest of the school budget. The original documents describing this arrangement are from 2004, and they were amended recently in 2007. In Burlington, those particular special ed expenses are handled as they handle employee pensions and insurance—what in Lexington parlance are “shared expenses.” The change arose in conditions similar to those experienced in Lexington in the last few years: out of district costs escalating rapidly and putting pressure on the “regular education” budget.

Burlington's total school enrollment is about 3700. Their out of district students consist of approximately 60 students in collaborative schools and approximately 50-55 students in other out of district schools. (Although the mix of collaborative and other out of district students differs from Lexington, they have approximately the same number of out of district students, ours totaling about 120.) Burlington officials were not familiar with the phenomenon of “unilateral placements.”

Burlington officials report they have much less contention about special education expenses in their town meeting since they adopted this new mechanism a few years ago, although the large amounts of money involved still attract considerable attention.

Note well: Burlington does not tax residences at the levy limit and does not have property tax overrides. They also have substantial cash reserves. Both these phenomena were explained as being due to annual new construction in their considerable commercial property. So, this

budgeting mechanism and the decisions made in Burlington all occur in a context that does not involve proposition 2.5 or overrides, even though the budget regularly increases more than 2.5%.

Burlington evidently has three scheduled town meetings a year, so there is, for example, a regular September town meeting. As in Lexington they sometimes have out of district students who move in or whose needs escalate after the school budget has been voted in the spring, and as in Lexington they occasionally take these requests for supplemental special education funding to their fall town meeting. Mr. Mercier explained that those requests (as shared expenses) are made “in concert” by municipal and school officials. In May of 2007 their town meeting approved a supplemental request for \$500,000 to “finish out” the school year. In the final analysis the special ed expense overrun was less than \$500,000, and the remainder will flow into the general fund. The Superintendent explained that in past years, when all special education was part of the school budget, the schools were more inclined to freeze expense categories in regular education to pay for these kinds of increases.

Mr. Valente and Mr. Diaz both thanked the Burlington officials and administrators for their time and their helpful information.

The School Committee voted 3-0 to adjourn at 11:10 a.m.. (Griffiths, Cohen)