

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in special session on Monday, June 8, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. in the library Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board of Education Members Present: Mrs. Petrella, Mrs. Cowan, Mr. Simmons, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Darcy, Mrs. Caramanello, and Mr. Konstantino (attended virtually).

Board of Education Members Absent: Mr. Stone and Mr. DeVecchio

Administration Present: Dr. Leggett, Superintendent of Schools and Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance

Mr. Moore called the meeting to order at 6:00 P.M.

### **Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

### **Approval of Agenda**

*Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mr. Roraback, to approve the agenda as presented.*

*All in favor of approving the agenda as presented: Mrs. Petrella, Mrs. Cowan, Mr. Simmons, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Darcy, Mrs. Caramanello, and Mr. Konstantino. Motion passed.*

### **Public Comment**

#### **A. In-person public comment**

Durham resident Maya Liss spoke on behalf of the Parents of Performers (POPs) Executive Board regarding the proposed elimination of stipends for the Jazz Combo and Jazz Band Club. She noted that both she and the organization had previously submitted letters expressing opposition to the cuts. Ms. Liss emphasized the importance of retaining the \$6,460.00 stipends, arguing that it provides a significant benefit to students and the community for a relatively small cost. She also shared that a petition supporting the stipends had been launched only 72 hours earlier and had already gathered 355 signatures, which she described as a substantial level of community support. She urged the board to keep the funding in the budget.

Ashley Schwartz, a Brewster School kindergarten teacher, Durham resident, and parent of three children in the district, spoke in support of maintaining the fifth kindergarten classroom at Brewster. She explained that current enrollment is only one student below the district's recommended maximum class size of 18 students, meaning that reducing to four classrooms would leave classes at or near capacity, with the likelihood of additional enrollments before the school year begins. Ms. Schwartz noted that a similar situation occurred two years earlier, resulting in the district reopening a classroom during the summer. She emphasized that kindergarten classrooms are not designed to comfortably accommodate more than 18

students and that small class sizes are especially important during the foundational years, when students are learning not only academics but also critical social, behavioral, and community-building skills.

Ms. Schwartz also expressed concern about the broader impact of budget reductions on students and programs. She argued that low voter turnout, rather than a lack of community support for education, contributed to the budget's rejection and that many voters may no longer have children in the school system or fully understand the importance of maintaining programs and manageable class sizes. Instead of cutting additional programs and positions, she urged parents and community members to increase voter participation and advocate for the school budget. Drawing on her own experience of moving to Durham for its strong school system, she encouraged the board to reconsider the proposed cuts and emphasized that all children in the community deserve access to the same positive educational experiences that have benefited her own children.

Dr. Leggett reminded attendees to refrain from clapping during public comment, explaining that visible displays of support could unintentionally discourage others with differing viewpoints from speaking. Dr. Leggett emphasized the importance of maintaining an environment where all community members feel comfortable sharing their opinions and ensuring that the board has the opportunity to hear a full range of perspectives in a respectful and inclusive manner.

Jill Sobolewski, a district graduate and parent of twins currently enrolled in the schools, echoed the concerns raised by previous speakers regarding the proposed budget cuts. She argued that the reductions being considered are too severe given the relatively small number of additional votes needed to pass the budget. Drawing from her own experience as a parent of kindergarten students, she stressed the importance of maintaining smaller class sizes, explaining that one of her daughters, who later required intervention services, might have gone unnoticed in a larger classroom setting. Ms. Sobolewski expressed concern that cuts to positions such as kindergarten and high school teaching staff would have a direct and lasting impact on students. Rather than reducing classroom resources and personnel, she urged the district and community to focus on increasing voter turnout and securing the additional support needed to pass the budget, emphasizing that early identification and support for struggling students can be critical to their long-term success.

Stephen Liss, a Durham resident of 24 years, thanked the Board of Education, superintendent, and district staff for the significant time and effort invested in developing the school budget. He noted that the budget had been defeated twice, first by 140 votes and then by just 31 votes after being reduced by approximately \$238,000.00, or slightly more than one-half of one percent. Mr. Liss highlighted that voter turnout increased substantially in the second referendum, with 357 additional voters participating and approximately 65% of those new voters supporting the budget. Based on those results, he argued that the budget cuts did not persuade opponents to change their votes; rather, increased awareness and participation brought more supporters to the polls.

Mr. Liss urged the board not to pursue further reductions, stating that additional proposed cuts, including a high school English teacher, a kindergarten teacher, an instructional coach/interventionist, and funding for the high school and middle school jazz programs, would directly harm students and educational opportunities. Instead, he encouraged the board to reverse course by restoring previously eliminated positions and programs, including the music teacher, speech-language pathologist, and elementary

teaching position that had been cut from earlier versions of the budget. He argued that the district should advocate for the resources it believes students need and rally community support around that vision rather than continuing to reduce services in hopes of winning over budget opponents. He concluded by urging the board to reinstate the original budget and fight for the educational opportunities it believes are important for students.

Lauren Bilello, a Durham resident, parent of a student at Strong Middle School, and music teacher in another district, urged the board to reconsider the proposed elimination of a music teaching position and the stipends supporting the jazz programs at both Coginchaug High School and Strong Middle School. Drawing on her professional experience, she argued that while students may continue to receive the same classes on paper, staffing reductions often diminish the quality of programming by increasing teacher workloads and reducing opportunities for individualized instruction, student support, and enrichment. She emphasized that successful music programs depend on strong teacher-student relationships and a consistent teacher presence, both of which become more difficult to maintain when teachers are spread across multiple buildings or assigned additional responsibilities.

Ms. Bilello also expressed concern about the broader impact of the proposed cuts on teacher morale and retention, noting that budget instability and staffing reductions are common factors that drive educators to seek employment elsewhere. She argued that retaining high-quality teachers should be a top priority, particularly during a period of school closures and financial challenges. As an alternative to cutting teaching positions, she suggested examining expenditures related to technology programs and devices, including Chromebooks, i-Ready, and IXL. She questioned the growing reliance on screen-based learning, citing concerns about the effects of excessive screen time on students' attention spans, anxiety levels, and opportunities for meaningful engagement with teachers and peers. Concluding her remarks, Ms. Bilello stressed that teachers are the most important school-based factor in student success and warned that reducing instructional staff could erode support among parents and community members who have historically backed school funding because of the district's strong educational programs. She encouraged the board to consider the long-term consequences of the proposed cuts on students, staff, and the overall quality of education in Region 13.

Eileen Buckheit, a Durham resident and parent, spoke in opposition to the proposed music program cuts. Referencing her daughter's recent receipt of a POPS scholarship, she explained that the value of the district's music programs extends far beyond musical performance skills. She noted that participation in music helped her daughter develop leadership abilities, time-management skills, academic balance, and a strong sense of community. Ms. Buckheit emphasized that Region 13 has long been recognized for its strong music program and dedicated music educators, and she argued that the relatively small amount of money being considered for cuts could have a disproportionate impact on students and the district's reputation.

Ms. Buckheit also highlighted concerns about the condition of the high school's auditorium, describing aging infrastructure such as outdated seating, nonfunctioning equipment, and an aging sound system that she said is in need of replacement. She suggested that the district view the music program and auditorium as valuable community assets rather than areas for reduction. Noting that the auditorium is used for outside events and performances that may generate revenue for the district, she proposed setting aside funds for long-term capital improvements to the facility, similar to the district's practice of saving for

future track renovations. She urged the board to reconsider the proposed music cuts and instead invest in preserving and strengthening the music program and related facilities.

John Giammatteo, a parent of an eighth-grade student at Strong Middle School spoke in support of preserving extracurricular opportunities, including the jazz band and freshman boys' basketball program. He thanked the board for its work during a difficult budget process and suggested that the reasons voters rejected the budget may not have been purely financial. Emphasizing the importance of developing well-rounded students, Mr. Giammatteo argued that music, athletics, and other activities outside the classroom play a critical role in student growth and engagement.

Drawing from personal experience, Mr. Giammatteo noted that many members of his son's basketball team have been making decisions about where to attend high school and that the friendships and camaraderie developed through athletics were a major factor in several students choosing to remain together within the district rather than pursue other options. Mr. Giammatteo expressed concern that eliminating programs such as the freshman boys' basketball team could negatively affect student participation, school connections, and retention, and urged the board to consider these broader impacts as it evaluates budget reductions.

Melissa Booth, a former Board of Education member and healthcare provider, expressed concern about the continued budget reductions and their impact on students. While acknowledging that she was unsure why the budget continued to fail, particularly in Middlefield, she noted hearing speculation that dissatisfaction over the school naming issue may have influenced some voters. From her perspective as a parent, she argued that the district is cutting programs and positions that may appear small in the budget but have significant effects on students. She emphasized that the board has historically prioritized students' social-emotional well-being and questioned whether that priority is being maintained when considering larger kindergarten class sizes and reductions to music programs. She also referenced the district's past goal of ensuring every student has at least one trusted adult in school and warned that eliminating extracurricular and enrichment opportunities could weaken those important connections.

Ms. Booth also raised concerns about the proposal to reduce the athletic trainer position from a full-year to an 11-month role. Drawing on her experience in healthcare, she cautioned that the savings generated by the reduction may be outweighed by the risks to student health and safety if the district struggles to retain the current trainer or provide consistent coverage. She recalled a previous period when athletic training services were pieced together through game-only coverage, leaving student-athletes without adequate support during practices. Given the increased demands associated with athletic participation and preseason activities, she urged the board to carefully consider the potential consequences of reducing athletic training services and other student supports.

Lauren Hall, a Durham resident, Region 13 alumna, current parent, and district educator, spoke about the importance of preserving the people who make the district successful. Acknowledging the difficult position facing the board and the challenge of making budget reductions, she noted that many previous speakers had already raised important points. Ms. Hall emphasized that what makes Region 13 special is not its facilities or programs alone, but the people within it. She explained that many graduates return to the district to raise their own children or work as educators because of the positive experiences and relationships they had while attending school there.

Ms. Hall argued that teachers are the district's most valuable resource and that students are its greatest investment. While recognizing that all aspects of the educational program are important, she urged the board to prioritize protecting staff whenever possible, describing educators as the foundation of the district's success and identity. She concluded by encouraging the board to focus on preserving its people, whom she believes are at the heart of what makes Region 13 a strong and desirable school community.

Katie Reddick, a Durham resident, parent of a Strong Middle School student, and former district employee, urged the board to avoid further reductions in teaching staff. She emphasized that teachers are the most important point of contact for students and argued that, while vacant positions may not always need to be filled immediately, eliminating additional staff positions could have long-term consequences for the district. Ms. Reddick expressed concern about the message being sent to current and prospective employees, noting that recent and proposed cuts, including the loss of a music teacher, a kindergarten teacher, and a high school teacher, create uncertainty and instability. She questioned how the district could continue to attract and retain talented educators if employees feel their positions may be eliminated after only a short period of service.

Ms. Reddick also raised concerns about the broader budget process, suggesting that some community members may feel pressured to support budgets out of fear that further cuts will be made if they do not pass. While acknowledging that board members are not seeking to harm students or take away opportunities, she cautioned against assuming that additional reductions will necessarily lead to budget approval. She urged the board to carefully consider the impact of continued staffing cuts on employee morale, recruitment, retention, and the overall quality of education before making further reductions.

### **B. Remote public comment**

Lori Fusco, a Durham resident and parent of two recent Region 13 graduates, thanked the board for its continued work on the challenging budget process and voiced support for comments made by earlier speakers advocating for the preservation of educational programs and staff. She argued that, in addition to resolving the current budget situation, the district should consider advocating for changes to the budget referendum process itself, suggesting that repeated budget failures create unnecessary costs for both towns and can undermine the district's ability to adequately fund education. Ms. Fusco stated that quality schools are a major reason families choose to live in the community and emphasized the importance of fully funding the programs and services that support student success.

Drawing on her family's experiences, Fusco highlighted the value of the district's music programs, in which both of her children participated. She also shared concerns about reducing athletic training services, recalling that one of her sons suffered a stress fracture during a period when the district did not have a full-time athletic trainer and that the injury was not identified promptly, resulting in significant recovery time. Based on these experiences, she urged the board to consider restoring the original budget and focus on mobilizing greater community involvement and voter participation rather than pursuing additional cuts.

Amanda Gigante, a Durham resident with two children currently enrolled in Region 13 schools, expressed support for previous comments advocating a return to the original budget proposal. She praised Superintendent Dr. Leggett for her efforts to communicate with residents by addressing frequently asked

questions and providing clarification about the budget. Ms. Gigante argued that many community members may have initially voted based on misconceptions or incomplete information and that the district has since done significant work to improve public understanding of the budget's details and implications.

Given the additional information now available to residents, Ms. Gigante suggested that the board consider returning to the original budget proposal and beginning the process again. She believed that the extensive efforts made to educate the community and clarify misunderstandings could lead to a different outcome if voters were given another opportunity to consider the budget with a better understanding of its contents and impact. She encouraged the board to build on the communication work already completed and revisit the budget from the beginning rather than continuing to make additional reductions.

Angela Boudreaux, an instructional coach at Lyman Elementary School and the staff member whose position was proposed for elimination, spoke about the personal and educational impact of the cut. She explained that she had left another district to join Region 13 because of its strong reputation and commitment to education, and that she felt she had finally found the right place in her career. Ms. Boudreaux expressed disappointment that the position she had come to value so highly was now being eliminated and used her experience to highlight broader concerns about the district's ability to attract and retain talented educators amid ongoing budget reductions.

Beyond her own situation, Ms. Boudreaux argued against making additional staffing cuts, emphasizing the critical role instructional coaches play in supporting teachers and improving student outcomes. She noted that with the reduction of curriculum leadership positions, teachers increasingly rely on high-quality coaching to implement instructional programs effectively and meet the diverse needs of students. Pointing to the number of students requiring intervention services, she suggested that teachers need continued support to strengthen core classroom instruction and reduce the need for additional interventions. While expressing hope that the district might return to the original budget proposal, she urged the board to carefully consider the long-term effects of staffing reductions on both educators and students before approving further cuts.

Mrs. Caramanello clarified that many of the budget reduction ideas discussed during public comment were preliminary proposals presented by the superintendent and had not been reviewed, debated, or approved by the Board of Education. Mrs. Caramanello emphasized that the board had not yet discussed the recommendations and that they should be viewed as potential options rather than board-endorsed decisions.

## **2026-2027 Budget**

### **A. Discuss and vote on revisions to the District's 2026-2027 fiscal year budget.**

Dr. Darcy presented a summary of public feedback received regarding the proposed budget reductions, while emphasizing that the analysis was informal and should not be considered a scientific study. Several caveats were noted, including that emails with multiple signatories were counted multiple times, meaning households or groups of educators could have greater representation in the data. Dr. Darcy also acknowledged some subjective judgment when categorizing comments, particularly when determining

whether writers opposed cuts to specific student-facing positions. Additionally, because many emails focused on particular proposed reductions, the data did not necessarily capture each writer's complete views on the budget as a whole.

The board received 47 emails related to the budget proposals. Of those, 19 came from educators living within the district, 30 were from residents, and one sender's residency could not be determined. The Parents of Performers (POPs) petition was counted as a single submission in the email tally, although it represented approximately 355 signatures, which Dr. Darcy noted demonstrated significant community support. According to the review, only four of the 47 emails expressed support for some or all of the proposed cuts, while the overwhelming majority opposed them. Among those supporting reductions, one specifically supported eliminating the director position, one broadly supported all proposed cuts, and a small number referenced support for reductions to interventionist or technology-related expenditures. Dr. Darcy concluded that, despite the limitations of the analysis, the feedback clearly reflected strong public opposition to many of the proposed reductions and substantial support for preserving student programs and positions.

Dr. Darcy expanded on the informal review of public comments and emails, incorporating feedback provided during the meeting. Dr. Darcy noted that support for preserving specific positions and programs was substantial, with 29 individuals expressing support for retaining the high school English teacher, 24 for the kindergarten teacher, 20 for interventionists, 18 for instructional coaches, and 10 for the director position. Strong support was also shown for extracurricular programs, with at least 12 people specifically advocating for the Coginchaug Jazz Combo and 13 for the Strong Middle School Jazz Club. Smaller numbers voiced support for maintaining freshman boys' and girls' basketball programs, while two speakers specifically raised concerns about reducing athletic trainer services.

The review also highlighted several alternative cost-saving suggestions submitted by community members. These included restructuring or reducing the athletic director position, exploring shared or as-needed athletic training services, examining whether football co-op hosting arrangements could be adjusted, reviewing club stipends and event staffing costs, reducing supply expenditures, restoring the previously eliminated music teacher position, and reevaluating professional development spending. Other suggestions reviewed were technology-related expenses, including Chromebooks and educational software subscriptions such as i-Ready and IXL. Dr. Darcy emphasized that these comments reflected community ideas rather than formal recommendations and expressed appreciation for the large volume of public input, noting that the detailed feedback provided valuable context beyond simple expressions of support or opposition.

In closing, board members thanked residents for attending and submitting comments, stressing that public engagement had been helpful in understanding community priorities. Mr. Moore remarked that increasing voter participation would likely be critical in any future budget referendum, suggesting that supporters of the school budget focus on encouraging more residents to vote. Mr. Moore also referenced a recently released informational video intended to explain the proposed reductions and the reasoning behind them. While acknowledging that none of the proposed cuts were desirable, Mr. Moore emphasized that the options under discussion were driven by the challenge of responding to a budget that had been rejected twice, despite remaining below the rate of increase seen in some other local municipal budgets.

Mr. Moore began the board's discussion by noting that the district's proposed budget increase remained below the percentage increases being seen in some local municipal budgets and emphasized that the board was carefully evaluating every proposed reduction. Mr. Moore expressed opposition to several of the suggested cuts, particularly those affecting intervention services, music programs, and extracurricular activities, arguing that the financial savings generated by many of these reductions were relatively small compared to the impact they would have on students. Mr. Moore observed that the strong public response demonstrated how much value the community places on programs across all areas of the school system and highlighted that even modest expenditures often support important student opportunities.

Mr. Moore specifically referenced concerns about eliminating music-related programs and freshman athletics, noting that these activities help attract and retain students within the district. Citing the freshman boys' basketball program as an example, Mr. Moore remarked that approximately 12 students were expected to participate and suggested that maintaining such programs could encourage students to remain in Region 13 rather than pursue other educational options. As an alternative, Mr. Moore stated a preference for returning as closely as possible to the original budget proposal and suggested considering the vacant curriculum director position as a potential area for savings. Mr. Moore noted that district leadership had successfully managed many of those responsibilities and pointed to support received from organizations such as ACES in curriculum and instructional work. While acknowledging that delaying progress in curriculum leadership could have drawbacks, Mr. Moore indicated that leaving the position unfilled for a longer period might represent a less disruptive option than reducing direct services and programs for students.

Dr. Darcy acknowledged the strong desire expressed by many community members to return to the original budget but stated that, despite personally sympathizing with that position, the board also had a responsibility to respond to the message sent by voters through two failed budget referendums. While noting that voter turnout had been low, Dr. Darcy argued that those who participated had expressed their views and that the board should recognize that feedback by making some level of reduction rather than restoring the entire original proposal.

As part of the discussion, Dr. Darcy reviewed several proposed cuts and questioned whether certain programs that were not offered this year, such as middle school drama and the freshman girls' basketball team, needed to remain funded in the budget. During the discussion about freshman basketball programs, Mrs. Cowan noted that participation levels for girls' basketball may increase in the future, citing a strong group of current seventh-grade players expected to move up to high school. Mrs. Cowan estimated that at least ten seventh-grade girls currently participate, while noting that the current eighth-grade class had only three or four players. Seeking clarification, Dr. Darcy asked whether students who would otherwise play on a freshman team could be accommodated on the junior varsity roster. Dr. Leggett responded that, for girls' basketball, the JV team would likely be able to absorb several additional players without issue. However, for boys' basketball, Dr. Leggett indicated that roster sizes would likely require cuts if a freshman team were eliminated, Dr. Darcy suggested that positions or stipends for programs without sufficient participation could potentially be removed without significantly affecting students. She also noted that there appeared to be little public opposition to eliminating some smaller expenditures, such as the assistant cheerleading coach position, certain technology-related costs, or the HUDL platform.

Dr. Darcy emphasized a strong preference for avoiding reductions to classroom teachers and direct student services. Specifically, she supported retaining the kindergarten teacher, high school English teacher, interventionist, and most student-facing positions. Instead, Dr. Darcy suggested that if additional savings were required, the board should consider administrative and instructional support positions, particularly the vacant Director of Teaching and Learning position or an instructional coach position. Dr. Darcy reasoned that responsibilities could potentially be redistributed among existing administrators and staff, creating a compromise that would minimize direct impacts on students while still achieving budget reductions.

Regarding the athletic trainer position, Dr. Darcy expressed mixed feelings. She recalled that the district had previously struggled when athletic training services were not consistently available and recognized the importance of student health and safety. At the same time, Dr. Darcy was open to exploring alternatives, such as modifying the position's schedule, if it could produce savings without significantly reducing coverage.

Mrs. Caramanello discussed what the savings would be if the board were to eliminate funding for middle school drama, the freshman girls' basketball team, the assistant fall cheerleading coach position, the HUDL technology platform, and the vacant Director of Teaching and Learning position. Dr. Darcy questioned what the savings would be in cutting the Instructional Coach position instead of the Director of Teaching and Learning position. However, Mrs. Caramanello remarked that the roles are different and she would prefer to keep both positions.

Mrs. Petrella outlined her priorities for potential budget reductions, stating that the kindergarten teaching position and high school English teaching position should be preserved because of their direct impact on students. Mrs. Petrella indicated a greater willingness to consider cuts in areas such as technology, curriculum-related expenditures, and other non-student-facing expenses before reducing classroom teaching positions. Regarding the vacant Director of Teaching and Learning position, Mrs. Petrella agreed with earlier comments that the district may be able to continue operating without filling the role. Mrs. Petrella praised Dr. Siegel's leadership and noted the significant support the district has received from ACES, suggesting that one curriculum leadership position, supported by outside expertise, may be sufficient at this time.

The discussion then shifted to instructional support positions. Mrs. Petrella emphasized that interventionists work directly with students and should be protected if possible. However, she expressed interest in learning more about the various instructional coaching roles throughout the district, including school-based coaches, the district-wide instructional coach, and the learner-centered coach position. After receiving clarification that the district-wide coach focuses on K-12 initiatives while school-based coaches support individual buildings, Mrs. Petrella suggested that, if a reduction became necessary, one of the instructional coaching positions might be a more reasonable option than cutting intervention services. She also inquired about the role of the district special education specialist and whether that position should be reviewed as part of the broader discussion of administrative and support staffing.

Dr. Darcy clarified that if an instructional coaching position were eliminated, the administration would ultimately determine how responsibilities would be redistributed. Turning to athletics, Mrs. Petrella referenced public comments suggesting that the athletic director position might be structured differently.

She noted that some community members had pointed out that other districts use stipended arrangements or shared responsibilities rather than a full administrative position and suggested that this might be an area worth examining as the board explored alternatives to cuts that would directly affect students and classroom instruction.

Mrs. Petrella indicated support for eliminating the assistant fall cheerleading coach position and the HUDL technology subscription. The discussion then turned to the proposal to reduce the athletic trainer position from a 12-month to an 11-month role. Mrs. Petrella recalled that the district had previously struggled when athletic training services were provided by multiple part-time trainers who were not consistently available and often lacked familiarity with the students. Seeking clarification, she asked whether there was a month during which athletic trainer coverage would be least necessary.

Athletic Director, Mr. Petronio explained that July would be the proposed month for the reduction because there is a break before official preseason practices begin. While summer conditioning activities do occur, they typically take place in the early morning or evening and would not have dedicated athletic trainer coverage if the position were reduced. Mrs. Petrella expressed some uncertainty about whether the savings justified the potential loss of availability and indicated a desire to consider the issue further.

Mrs. Petrella also noted the significant public support expressed for music programs and stated a preference for retaining funding for the jazz programs rather than cutting them. Regarding middle school drama, she observed that the program had not been filled or offered during the current year, suggesting that removing funding for it would have little practical impact in the short term.

Mr. Moore defended the district's instructional coaching and interventionist positions, drawing on the district's past experience with student achievement. Mr. Moore recalled that approximately eight to ten years earlier, Region 13 had seen a decline in student performance and adopted a board goal of returning to the highest-performing tier among comparable districts. According to Mr. Moore, district leadership at the time implemented instructional coaching as a key strategy to improve teaching practices and support staff in adopting new instructional approaches. Mr. Moore stated that the district saw significant improvement within a few years and credited instructional coaches and interventionists as major contributors to that progress. Referring to discussions at Student Achievement Committee meetings, Mr. Moore noted that some student performance indicators have not yet fully returned to pre-pandemic levels and argued that continued instructional support is essential if the district hopes to accelerate improvement. He praised district administrators and educators for pushing academic progress forward but stressed that achieving further gains will require ongoing investment in instructional leadership and teacher support.

Mrs. Caramanello stated clear opposition to eliminating any instructional coaching positions, arguing that coaches remain a critical resource for teachers and play an important role in improving student outcomes. Mrs. Caramanello viewed both coaches and interventionists as essential components of the district's academic improvement efforts and cautioned against reducing positions that directly contribute to instructional quality and student achievement.

Mrs. Caramanello argued strongly in favor of restoring and maintaining the Director of Teaching and Learning position, emphasizing the importance of having a dedicated instructional leader who can coordinate curriculum, instruction, and professional development across schools and grade levels. While

acknowledging that the district has continued to make progress with support from the associate director and ACES, Mrs. Caramanello suggested that the district's growth demonstrates the potential benefits of investing further in instructional leadership rather than eliminating the position. Drawing on personal experience working in the district when a curriculum director was previously in place, she stated that staff have consistently expressed a desire for a leader focused on aligning curriculum and supporting instructional improvement district-wide. Mrs. Caramanello viewed the position as a key component of the district's next stage of academic growth and indicated that restoring it was one of their highest priorities.

Mrs. Caramanello also expressed firm opposition to cutting any positions that directly support students or classroom instruction. This included the kindergarten teacher, high school English teacher, instructional coaches, and interventionists. In her view, these positions were essential to student success and should not be considered for reduction. Instead, she favored pursuing smaller cuts in areas that had generated less concern from the public, arguing that even modest reductions would demonstrate responsiveness to voters while minimizing harm to students.

Seeking additional alternatives, Mrs. Caramanello asked whether there were other nonessential expenditures that could be reduced before eliminating staff positions. As an example, she inquired about optional student travel opportunities, such as international trips, and whether any district funds were used to support them. Dr. Leggett clarified that such trips are self-funded by participating students and that the cost of chaperones is covered through trip fees rather than the district budget. In response to the broader question about other possible reductions, Dr. Leggett noted that many non-personnel cuts had already been made. These included reducing the capital improvement contribution from 2% to 1%, cutting supply budgets by 15%, and eliminating five positions in the original budget proposal. Dr. Leggett established that many of the easier reductions had already been exhausted, leaving fewer options that would generate meaningful savings without affecting staffing or programs.

Dr. Leggett clarified her position regarding the proposed budget reductions, emphasizing that her preferred budget remained the original proposal she had presented to the board. She explained that she would not have recommended the earlier staffing reductions if she believed they would have a significant negative impact on students and stressed that supporting the proposed cuts was not the same as believing they were ideal. Rather, the recommendations were developed in response to the reality that the budget had been rejected twice by voters.

Dr. Leggett noted that many community members had contacted her asking whether she supported all of the proposed reductions. She responded that her true preference was the original budget, but she also believed the district had a responsibility to recognize the message being communicated through two failed referendums. While acknowledging that a budget defeat does not necessarily indicate agreement on what should be cut, she argued that repeated "no" votes are, in fact, a form of communication that the board and administration cannot ignore and that some response is likely necessary.

Dr. Leggett also addressed suggestions that the district continue searching for small reductions throughout the budget. Dr. Leggett explained that the administration had already spent considerable time reviewing the budget line by line and had implemented many non-personnel reductions where possible.

Mrs. Caramanello referenced suggestions from residents, including questions about offering voluntary separation or retirement incentives. Dr. Leggett responded that such matters are subject to collective bargaining and therefore could not be discussed publicly. Dr. Leggett also explained that eliminating the athletic director position would not generate immediate budget savings because, under the administrators' collective bargaining agreement, an administrator whose position is eliminated is entitled to another district position at the same salary for one year.

The conversation then shifted to public suggestions about reducing central office staffing. Dr. Leggett and board members sought to correct what they described as misconceptions about the size and structure of the district's central office. Mrs. Cowan emphasized that central office employees are often viewed as easy targets for cuts but perform critical functions necessary to keep the district operating. Mrs. Cowan clarified that several positions encompass multiple responsibilities. For example, one individual handles payroll, benefits coordination, and accounts payable functions. Dr. Leggett stressed that employees in a small district routinely perform duties well beyond their formal job descriptions and support students, families, staff, and district operations on a daily basis.

Mr. Moore provided an overview of the central office structure, describing it as lean. Mr. Moore included an executive assistant who supports both the superintendent and the Board of Education; the finance director, who oversees both the operating budget and the district's major construction project; human resources personnel responsible for employee benefits and labor-related matters; facilities management overseeing multiple school buildings and construction activities; technology staff supporting district-wide systems; and special education administration responsible for special education programs, related services, nursing, psychology services, homeless student coordination, and compliance requirements. Board members argued that, despite perceptions to the contrary, central office staffing levels are lean and that reducing those positions could have significant operational consequences. Dr. Leggett commended the work that is being done by central office staff. Mrs. Caramanello agreed that it was important for the public to understand the scope of responsibilities handled by central office personnel and acknowledged that these positions are essential to district operations.

Mrs. Caramanello then outlined her budget priorities, expressing opposition to cuts affecting student-facing staff and programs. She stated that she did not support eliminating any positions that work directly with students and was also opposed to reducing music programs, citing the strong community support expressed during public comment. Mrs. Caramanello additionally supported maintaining the freshman boys' basketball program, noting testimony that the program helps retain students within the district and encourages them to continue their education at Cuginchaug High School alongside their peers. She also advocated for retaining the Director of Teaching and Learning position, arguing that instructional leadership remains important to the district's continued growth and improvement. While recognizing that some budget reductions may be necessary, she suggested that the focus should be on making thoughtful and strategic cuts rather than pursuing the largest possible reductions. Mrs. Caramanello emphasized that the district's recent efforts to communicate budget impacts and engage the public had generated greater awareness and participation, and she believed that informed community engagement would be more valuable than making deeper cuts that could negatively affect students and educational programs.

Mrs. Cowan expressed opposition to eliminating the Director of Teaching and Learning position, arguing that the district needs dedicated instructional leadership to continue its academic improvement efforts.

Mrs. Cowan noted that the district had already made meaningful progress and believed that adding a full-time director could accelerate gains even further. In her view, the position would benefit both students and staff by providing focused leadership in curriculum, instruction, and professional learning, helping the district continue moving toward its academic goals.

Mrs. Cowan also opposed eliminating the high school English teacher position, citing concerns about consistency and student support in English Language Arts. Referencing feedback from a parent email and personal experience with students who have experienced multiple curriculum and staffing changes, Mrs. Cowan argued that students need stability, particularly in an area where some continue to require intervention services. She emphasized that reducing instructional support in English would be counterproductive at a time when the district is still working to recover academically and address student needs.

In addition, Mrs. Cowan advocated for restoring the capital reserve contribution to the full 2% allowed by policy. Mrs. Cowan argued that the district's ability to save for future needs, such as auditorium renovations and other capital projects, is limited by the reserve cap and that maximizing contributions each year is the best way to prepare for future expenses. While acknowledging that the budget had been defeated by 31 votes, she ultimately favored leaving the budget unchanged from the most recent proposal rather than making further reductions. She attributed the budget's failure primarily to voter turnout rather than widespread opposition to specific programs or positions.

Mrs. Cowan concluded by emphasizing the importance of community engagement in any future referendum. Recognizing that board members and administrators are limited in their ability to advocate for the budget, she encouraged parents, staff, and community supporters to become more active in educating voters and encouraging participation. In her view, increased public engagement offered a better path to budget approval than additional cuts to educational programs and services, and she indicated she would even support returning to the original budget proposal if that option were considered.

Mr. Simmons stated that he was not in favor of any of the proposed budget cuts and aligned his views with those of another board member who had advocated for preserving the current budget. Mr. Simmons noted that he had originally supported the superintendent's first budget proposal, which carried approximately a 4.5% increase, and argued that such an increase was reasonable given inflation, rising costs, and the fact that local municipal budgets were increasing at even higher rates. In his view, there was a strong argument that even the original budget did not fully fund all of the district's needs.

Mr. Simmons questioned the long-standing assumption that a failed budget referendum automatically requires additional cuts. Referencing comments from community members, he suggested that the board may need to rethink its approach and consider whether repeatedly reducing programs and services is the appropriate response to budget defeats. He expressed discomfort with presenting budgets in a way that makes residents feel they must vote yes simply to prevent further losses, arguing that this approach creates a negative dynamic between the district and the community.

Mr. Simmons also challenged the traditional interpretation of fiscal responsibility as simply identifying what can be cut while maintaining operations. Instead, they encouraged the board to think about how investments in education can strengthen the district and attract families. Using kindergarten class size as

an example, he suggested that rather than debating the elimination of a kindergarten teacher, the district could consider how expanding services and maintaining smaller classes might improve educational outcomes and make the district more attractive to prospective families. Ultimately, Mr. Simmons favored leaving the budget unchanged rather than implementing additional reductions and indicated support for allowing the current proposal to proceed without further cuts.

Mr. Roraback reflected on what he believed to be a common public misconception surrounding the closure of Brewster School. He noted that many residents assume that because a building is now empty, the district should immediately realize significant budget savings. Mr. Roraback explained that this perception does not reflect the district's current reality. With students and programs now distributed across multiple schools, the district is still managing additional logistical and operational challenges, and the benefits of the consolidation are expected to be realized over time rather than immediately. Mr. Roraback emphasized that the school closure was undertaken as a long-term strategy to help control future costs, not as a source of instant savings.

Turning to the proposed budget reductions, Mr. Roraback strongly opposed eliminating the jazz programs, describing the approximately \$6,000.00 cost as relatively minor compared to the significant benefits music programs provide. He stressed that music offers students a sense of belonging and engagement, particularly for those who may struggle to find their place elsewhere in school. Drawing on personal experience as a parent, he spoke about the positive impact music programs can have on student confidence, social connections, and overall school experience. Based on those benefits, he characterized preserving the jazz programs as an easy decision.

Mr. Roraback also expressed confidence in the administration's assessment that the previously proposed reduction of a music teaching position would not result in the loss of music programming. Dr. Leggett remarked that next year's schedule had already been developed and that no music offerings were being eliminated. While acknowledging that no staffing reduction is ideal, he indicated that, if additional cuts were unavoidable, he would be more willing to consider eliminating the district-wide instructional coach position than reducing music programs or other direct student opportunities.

Finally, Mr. Roraback commented on suggestions related to athletics administration. Drawing on personal experience, he noted that athletic director responsibilities are extensive and involve substantial compliance and operational requirements. While he recognized that alternative structures, such as stipend positions, might be worth exploring in the future, he did not view that as an immediate solution.

Mr. Konstantino stated that he generally favored returning to an earlier version of the budget, ideally the original proposal, though he could also support the first revised budget. He indicated that certain reductions, such as eliminating funding for middle school drama that had gone unused, were reasonable and manageable.

Mr. Konstantino specifically highlighted concerns about the proposed elimination of a kindergarten teaching position. As a parent of incoming kindergarten students, he noted that enrollment is already near the district's recommended class-size limits and expressed concern that removing a classroom would leave little flexibility for additional enrollments and could negatively affect students' learning

environment. He argued that maintaining appropriate class sizes in the early grades is critical and viewed the proposed kindergarten reduction as unacceptable.

Mr. Konstantino also strongly supported retaining the Director of Teaching and Learning position. Having participated in the district's interview process for the role, he described the candidate pool as exceptionally strong, noting that the district had narrowed a large field of applicants down to a group of highly qualified educational leaders. He emphasized that the candidates brought impressive experience and accomplishments from other districts and expressed excitement about the potential impact such leadership could have on Region 13's instructional programs and student achievement. Mr. Konstantino argued that the district has reached a point where additional curriculum and instructional leadership is needed to help move academic performance forward.

Mrs. Petrella observed that the district has already begun moving in a new direction academically over the past year and cautioned against viewing student achievement solely through the lens of whether a curriculum leadership position exists. Mrs. Petrella argued that improvements in student outcomes are influenced by broader factors, including the district's instructional vision, priorities, and strategic direction. In her view, the changes already underway are likely to produce measurable results in the coming years, regardless of any single position, and the district should allow time for those initiatives to take effect.

Building on that point, Dr. Leggett highlighted the upcoming public release of the district's Vision of a Graduate and Strategic Plan, describing it as an important milestone for the district. Dr. Leggett expressed enthusiasm about the work that had gone into developing the plan and said it provides a strong roadmap for the future. While acknowledging that the plan is extensive and ambitious, Dr. Leggett emphasized that it establishes a clear direction for the district and reflects a renewed focus on long-term improvement. The board members expressed optimism that the district's new vision and strategic priorities will ultimately lead to stronger student outcomes and continued academic progress.

Dr. Leggett reiterated that her responsibility is to present the budget she believes is necessary to meet the educational needs of students in the district, and that budget was the original proposal brought forward earlier in the process. At the same time, she acknowledged that the budget's rejection by voters cannot be ignored and that failed referendums are a form of communication from the community. She emphasized the importance of recognizing the financial pressures many residents are facing and approaching the process with respect for those concerns.

Dr. Leggett expressed appreciation for the significant amount of public feedback received during the latest round of budget discussions, noting that the volume and detail of comments provided the board with valuable insight into community priorities. She remarked that such engagement would have been helpful earlier in the process and viewed the increased participation as a positive development.

Addressing the list of proposed reductions, Dr. Leggett explained that creating it had been difficult because the administration had already presented the budget it believed was appropriate for the district. As a result, when asked to identify possible reductions, the goal was not to target a single area but rather to distribute potential cuts across the organization in a balanced manner. The proposed options included positions and programs from multiple levels and departments, administration, instructional support,

intervention services, classroom teaching, athletics, and the arts, so that no single group would bear the full burden of reductions. Dr. Leggett emphasized that the list was intended to provide a broad range of possibilities for consideration.

Mrs. Caramanello requested additional clarification about the district-wide learner-centered coach position, explaining that she understood the role of school-based instructional coaches but wanted a better understanding of the learner-centered coach's current responsibilities. In response, Dr. Leggett explained that the position remains highly involved in classrooms, teacher support, and curriculum implementation across the district.

Dr. Siegel described the learner-centered coach as playing a key role in the implementation of personalized mathematics instruction, particularly at the elementary level. The coach has been supporting the district's personalized math initiative in fifth grade, exploring expansion into additional grade levels, developing instructional materials, and assisting teachers with implementation. The position also provides support for assessment initiatives, including work related to elementary assessment practices and instructional planning. In addition, the learner-centered coach has been heavily involved in curriculum revision efforts, especially in mathematics and social studies. Responsibilities have included reviewing curriculum documents, ensuring alignment with standards, supporting teachers during curriculum implementation, and helping coordinate district-wide instructional consistency. The coach works directly with teachers in classrooms and collaborates across grade levels to support curriculum development and instructional improvement.

Dr. Leggett also used the discussion to address a perception that curriculum and instructional work had stalled while the Director of Teaching and Learning position remained vacant. Dr. Leggett emphasized that significant progress has continued under the leadership of Dr. Siegel and praised her work overseeing curriculum, instruction, and assessment initiatives throughout the year. Dr. Leggett stated that the district has continued moving forward in those areas and stressed that it would be inaccurate to suggest that curriculum development or instructional improvement efforts have been on hold. She credited both Dr. Siegel and the learner-centered coach with helping advance important district initiatives despite the vacancy in the leadership position.

The conversation then shifted toward identifying whether a relatively small amount of additional savings, approximately \$100,000.00, could be achieved through a collection of smaller reductions rather than eliminating major positions or programs. Mrs. Neubig acknowledged that even minor cuts can be difficult and unpopular, but some felt that modest reductions might be necessary to respond to the budget's defeat while preserving core educational services.

Mrs. Neubig raised a suggestion that had surfaced in community conversations: examining costs related to student supplies and field trips. Dr. Leggett responded that the district currently covers many student supply expenses. She noted that, during discussions among the leadership team, there had been consideration of shifting some costs to families through student supply purchases or increased field trip and transportation fees. However, the administration ultimately decided against that approach. Dr. Leggett explained that one of the major concerns raised throughout the budget process has been the financial strain many families are experiencing. Given that reality, the leadership team felt it would be inappropriate to balance the budget by transferring additional costs directly to parents. The goal was to

avoid reductions that would effectively become hidden fees for families or create barriers to student participation in school activities.

Mrs. Petrella sought clarification regarding the district's mathematics support structure. She noted that the district already employs math interventionists in its schools and asked whether instructional coaches also provide support in mathematics. Dr. Leggett confirmed that, while math interventionists work directly with students who need additional assistance, instructional coaches also support mathematics instruction by working with teachers on curriculum implementation, instructional strategies, and classroom practices. Mrs. Cowan further observed that one of the district's recent Teacher of the Year recipients served in a math interventionist role

The discussion turned to the impact of rising operating costs on the budget. Mr. Moore noted that expenses for electricity, natural gas, heating fuel, and other utilities have increased significantly, contributing to overall budget pressures.

The discussion then turned to field trip funding. Mrs. Neubig reported that the district currently budgets approximately \$27,000.00 annually for field trips. Dr. Darcy suggested that, while it would be difficult to make changes immediately, future discussions could explore a larger role for Parent-Teacher Organizations (PTOs) in supporting those costs. Dr. Darcy noted that many PTOs engage in significant fundraising activities and could potentially help offset field trip expenses, reducing pressure on the district budget. Mr. Simmons strongly opposed the idea of reducing field trip funding, arguing that the potential savings, approximately \$27,000.00 in a budget exceeding \$40 million, would be too small to justify the impact on students. Dr. Darcy clarified that the earlier suggestion was not intended to eliminate field trips but rather to explore whether community organizations, such as PTOs, could partner with the district to help fund some of those experiences. Mr. Roraback noted that, historically, families were sometimes asked to contribute toward field trips, with assistance funds available for students in need, but acknowledged that shifting costs away from the district effectively transfers those expenses to families or outside groups.

Mrs. Cowan asked where \$100,000.00 reductions could be made. Dr. Leggett explained that if the board directed the administration to identify approximately \$100,000.00 in additional reductions without cutting major student-facing positions, the administration could likely assemble those savings through a combination of smaller budget adjustments. She suggested that potential areas for reduction could include unfilled stipends, certain technology software expenditures, curriculum-related software and supply accounts, and professional development budget lines. The emphasis would be on finding savings in operational and support areas rather than eliminating classroom teachers or direct student services.

Mr. Simmons explored whether relatively small reductions could be found elsewhere in the budget before considering cuts to student-facing positions or programs. While emphasizing that he was not advocating for the reduction, Mr. Simmons pointed to approximately \$40,000.00 in capital expenses as an example of a discretionary expenditure that could potentially be delayed if the board felt compelled to identify additional savings. Mrs. Caramanella stressed, however, that she did not believe significant additional cuts were necessary and felt the district was in a stronger position heading into another budget vote because of the increased public engagement and support demonstrated at the meeting.

Mrs. Neubig noted that even if the board directed an additional \$100,000 in reductions, the overall budget increase would still remain in the mid-3% range. Drawing on discussions at Student Achievement Committee meetings, Mrs. Petrella argued that the district has already experienced a substantial improvement in curriculum work, instructional planning, and academic direction under current leadership and with support from ACES. Mrs. Petrella described the difference in the quality and scope of curriculum work as "night and day" compared to previous years and expressed confidence that the district was moving in a positive direction.

While acknowledging that some board members favored maintaining both the Director of Teaching and Learning position and the full cadre of instructional coaches, Mrs. Cowan suggested that, if the board ultimately concluded that a staffing reduction was unavoidable, she would be more comfortable with the approach previously discussed by Dr. Darcy: Retaining the Director of Teaching and Learning position while reducing the number of instructional coaching positions. Mrs. Caramanello emphasized that her preference would be to keep both.

Mrs. Caramanello asked whether district staff had been formally surveyed or otherwise consulted about the need for the Director of Teaching and Learning position, particularly given that the district appeared to be close to hiring a candidate. Mrs. Caramanello was interested in understanding whether teachers and staff believed the position was necessary or whether they would be comfortable continuing with the current structure. In response, Dr. Leggett explained that no formal survey had been conducted asking staff whether they preferred a Director of Teaching and Learning position or whether they would support eliminating it. However, she suggested that if staff were asked broadly about the issue, most would likely prefer to retain all of the positions currently under discussion, including teachers, interventionists, coaches, and leadership roles. At the same time, Dr. Leggett iterated the practical reality driving the conversation. Given the financial challenges facing the district and the need to identify possible reductions, the position was viewed as one area where services could potentially continue, at least temporarily, without causing the same immediate impact as cuts to classroom teachers, interventionists, or other direct student services.

Mrs. Caramanello asked if the district retained the Director of Teaching and Learning position, would the responsibilities of the director, associate leadership, and learner-centered coach overlap and if maintaining all three positions was necessary given the district's financial situation. In response, Dr. Leggett acknowledged that the district still has significant work to do to improve student achievement and instructional outcomes.

Mrs. Cowan remarked that the district had received more feedback on the budget in recent weeks than it had over several months combined. Referring to the email summary and public comments presented earlier, Mrs. Cowan argued that the overwhelming message from parents, staff, and community members was opposition to additional cuts. She observed that very few people had advocated for specific reductions and that most feedback focused on preserving positions, programs, and services. Mrs. Cowan suggested that the board should take that feedback seriously, particularly because community engagement had historically been limited and this represented one of the strongest responses the board had received on a budget issue.

Mr. Roraback emphasized the importance of improving collaboration between the school district and local municipal leaders. He expressed concern that the relationship between the district and the towns can sometimes appear adversarial and argued that stronger communication and cooperation are needed. Mr. Roraback pointed to the recent attendance of both town first selectmen at a Building Committee meeting as a positive example and suggested that more regular engagement between district and municipal leadership could help foster a shared understanding of challenges, improve public communication, and reduce the perception that the Board of Education bears sole responsibility for difficult financial decisions.

Dr. Leggett attempted to frame the difficult choice facing the board if it decided that an additional reduction was necessary. She noted that the discussion appeared to be narrowing toward two possibilities: reducing an instructional coaching position or eliminating the Director of Teaching and Learning position. On one hand, Dr. Leggett praised the district's instructional coaches, describing them as highly effective educators who provide valuable support to teachers and students. At the same time, she pointed out that the district's planned consolidation could eventually lead to a reduction in coaching positions in future years as staffing structures are adjusted. Because of that possibility, reducing a coaching position now might have less long-term impact than it would under other circumstances. She acknowledged that this was difficult to say and expressed regret about discussing potential reductions to positions held by highly respected staff members. On the other hand, Dr. Leggett noted that one of the most common public criticisms during the budget process has been the perception that administrative positions are protected while cuts fall elsewhere. If the board wished to respond to those concerns by reducing an administrative position, the Director of Teaching and Learning role would be the most likely option because it remained vacant. Dr. Leggett encouraged the board to weigh those competing considerations carefully as it considered how to balance budget reductions with educational priorities.

The superintendent also addressed the broader debate about whether repeated budget defeats should automatically lead to additional cuts. Speaking from her perspective as a first-year superintendent in the district, she acknowledged the sentiment expressed by some residents that the district should respond to budget rejections by advocating more strongly for educational investments rather than reducing services. However, she argued that the traditional interpretation of a failed budget vote is that voters believe the proposal is too expensive and expect reductions. While recognizing that public comments and emails had expressed significant support for maintaining programs, she emphasized that hundreds of voters had cast "no" ballots and that those votes are also a form of communication that must be considered. The superintendent suggested that the board's challenge was balancing those competing messages while trying to determine the most responsible path forward.

Mr. Simmons argued that the district is now receiving far more public feedback than it did during earlier budget cycles and that the recent emails, petitions, and public comments provided a clearer picture of community sentiment. He suggested that the large volume of responses opposing cuts represented a meaningful form of communication that should be weighed alongside referendum results. While acknowledging that the feedback was not scientific, he felt it demonstrated substantial support for preserving programs and positions.

Mr. Moore raised a concern about the uncertainty surrounding voter behavior if the board decided not to make additional cuts. Referring to the strong public support shown for music programs, athletics, and

other student activities, Mr. Moore questioned whether preserving those programs would actually translate into increased voter turnout. Specifically, he wondered whether the hundreds of people who signed petitions or spoke in favor of retaining programs such as jazz band would still feel motivated to vote if the threatened cuts were removed.

The discussion also focused on the concern that repeated budget cuts can create a dynamic in which parents and community members feel pressured to vote for budgets out of fear of losing valued programs. Mr. Simmons described this as an "implicit threat" embedded in the budget process, the sense that if residents vote no, students will lose opportunities. Speaking both as a parent and a board member, Mr. Simmons expressed discomfort with that approach and questioned whether the district should continue operating under that model simply because it has traditionally been done that way.

Mr. Moore acknowledged that changing the process would not be easy and would require a long-term shift in how the community engages with school budgets. Mr. Moore emphasized the need to build stronger public support, increase voter turnout, and more effectively communicate the value of educational programs rather than relying primarily on reductions after failed votes.

Mrs. Petrella argued that if the board felt obligated to make an additional reduction, it would be more logical to eliminate an administrative position rather than a teaching or student-support position. She suggested that reducing the Director of Teaching and Learning position could be viewed as a balanced approach because the district had already considered cuts affecting teachers and student services, while an administrative reduction would demonstrate that all areas of the organization were sharing in the sacrifice.

However, Mrs. Cowan pushed back, observing that the discussion around the table suggested there was little support for eliminating the Director of Teaching and Learning position. She attempted to summarize the board's emerging consensus, noting that most members, both in person and online, appeared to favor retaining the curriculum leadership position despite earlier suggestions that it could be a target for reductions. She acknowledged that there were differing views but felt that a majority of board members had expressed support for maintaining the position.

Seeking to focus the discussion and move toward a decision, Mrs. Cowan suggested that two primary options appeared to remain under consideration. The first was to largely retain the most recently defeated budget while identifying approximately \$100,000.00 in smaller reductions through items such as unfilled stipends, technology expenditures, curriculum-related accounts, or other operational adjustments. The second option was to preserve the Director of Teaching and Learning position while reducing the number of instructional coaching positions, allowing the district to maintain curriculum leadership while still achieving meaningful savings.

Mrs. Petrella noted that Dr. Leggett had previously indicated that staffing adjustments among instructional coaches could occur in future years as part of district consolidation efforts. However, Mrs. Cowan noted that the majority of members resisted cutting the curriculum leadership position itself. Mr. Roraback responded by indicating a willingness to retain the instructional coaching positions while reconsidering the Director of Teaching and Learning role. He acknowledged Mrs. Petrella's assessment that the district had functioned effectively during the vacancy with support from ACES and existing leadership. Given the financial pressures facing the district, he suggested that the curriculum leadership

position might be viewed as a desirable addition that the district could postpone until budget conditions improved.

Mrs. Caramanello requested the salary amounts for the positions being discussed. Mrs. Neubig responded that eliminating the instructional coaching position would save approximately \$111,133.00 in salary. For comparison, Mrs. Neubig reported that the vacant Director of Teaching and Learning position was budgeted at \$176,426.00 in salary, with an additional roughly \$35,000.00 in benefits. Mrs. Petrella highlighted what she saw as the key distinction between the two options: eliminating the Director of Teaching and Learning position would generate greater savings while affecting no current employee, whereas eliminating an instructional coaching position would save less money and would directly impact a staff member through a layoff or position reduction.

Mrs. Cowan responded to the comparison between eliminating the vacant Director of Teaching and Learning position and reducing an instructional coach position by emphasizing that the absence of a person in the role does not mean the position has no impact. Mr. Simmons argued that the Director of Teaching and Learning position affects teachers and students across the district through curriculum leadership, instructional coordination, and academic planning. While eliminating the position would not result in a layoff, he contended that the district would still lose an important educational resource that many staff members have advocated for over time.

Dr. Darcy acknowledged that she had previously been skeptical about the importance of the specific title or structure of the position, often arguing that the work simply needed to be done by someone. However, she explained that feedback received during the current budget cycle had caused her to reconsider. In addition to the public comments and emails submitted to the board, several individuals had personally reached out to discuss the value of the position and its potential impact on the district. Dr. Darcy stated that those conversations had been persuasive and led them to change her view, elevating the Director of Teaching and Learning position to one of their highest priorities for retention.

The discussion then returned to the financial implications of the remaining options. Board members reviewed how different reductions would affect the overall budget increase. Mrs. Neubig indicated that an additional \$100,000.00 reduction would lower the budget increase to roughly the mid-3% range. With those adjustments, the projected increase would fall to approximately 3.35% gross and about 3.16% net, depending on the final decisions.

Board members began identifying where consensus appeared to exist and where disagreements remained. Mrs. Cowan favored keeping the Director of Teaching and Learning position. However, she also acknowledged the need to move the process forward and indicated that, if necessary, she could support a compromise involving approximately \$100,000 in budget reductions rather than eliminating major positions.

Mrs. Caramanello explained that, if forced to choose among instructional support positions, the learner-centered coach would be the role she would be most willing to consider for reduction. She emphasized that this was not her preferred outcome and noted that all of the coaches contribute to student learning. However, she felt that positions working most directly with students and teachers on a daily basis should receive the highest priority for retention. Given the expectation that some coaching positions may

eventually be reduced as part of future consolidation efforts, she viewed the learner-centered coach as the most likely candidate if a staffing reduction became unavoidable.

Mrs. Petrella reiterated a different perspective, maintaining that both the Director of Teaching and Learning position and a coaching position could be considered for reduction. While acknowledging the value of curriculum leadership in the past, Mrs. Petrella argued that the district's circumstances have changed significantly over the last year under the leadership of the new superintendent and the current administrative team. Mrs. Petrella emphasized that the district now has a much clearer sense of direction than it did previously, pointing to the development of a comprehensive strategic plan and the establishment of defined goals and priorities. In her view, these accomplishments represent substantial progress and demonstrate that the district is already moving forward effectively without a Director of Teaching and Learning in place. She credited the superintendent's leadership, along with the work of existing administrators, particularly Dr. Siegel, for helping to create momentum and focus throughout the organization.

Mrs. Caramanello responded by acknowledging the significant progress the district has made under its current leadership but argued that preserving the Director of Teaching and Learning position is about more than evaluating whether the district has managed successfully without it for a year. She emphasized that the need for the position predates the current administration and has been discussed by the board and community for years. In her view, the position was not created on a whim but rather as part of a long-recognized effort to strengthen curriculum, instruction, and academic leadership across the district. Mrs. Caramanello recalled that when the superintendent first arrived, the board intentionally delayed filling the position rather than eliminating it outright. The purpose of the delay was to provide time for assessment, planning, and a thoughtful hiring process, not to abandon the role altogether. Because of that history, she expressed concern that removing the position now would effectively reverse a decision the board had already made and could send a conflicting message to both staff and the community.

Mr. Simmons also pointed out that the district had already invested considerable time and effort into the hiring process. The district appeared to be nearing the point of extending an offer but could not due to the lack of approved budget. Dr. Darcy indicated a willingness to compromise by pursuing approximately \$100,000.00 in additional reductions. Mr. Simmons voiced opposition to the emerging compromise of identifying an additional \$100,000.00 in reductions without specifying exactly where those cuts would come from. He reiterated that he had not supported any of the proposed reductions discussed throughout the meeting and remained concerned about making arbitrary cuts simply to reach a target dollar amount.

Mr. Roraback supported \$100,000.00 reductions. He also suggested that, because district-wide coaching positions may be reduced as part of next year's consolidation efforts, accelerating that reduction by one year could be a practical way to achieve savings while preparing for an anticipated future staffing structure.

Mr. Konstantino expressed satisfaction that the Director of Teaching and Learning position appeared likely to be preserved. He stated that, given the understanding that an instructional coaching position was already expected to be reduced during the consolidation process, it made sense to consider moving that timeline forward if a staffing reduction was unavoidable. He also agreed with concerns that had been raised about pursuing an arbitrary dollar amount in cuts without clearly identifying where the savings

would come from. He suggested that reducing a coaching position was more logical than attempting to reach a predetermined savings target through miscellaneous reductions.

Mrs. Cowan cautioned that pursuing a compromise involving only \$100,000.00 in non-student-facing reductions carried significant risk. She explained that if the board preserved positions and programs while making only modest operational cuts, the success of the budget would depend heavily on increased voter turnout and stronger community advocacy. She warned that if the budget failed again despite those efforts, the district could ultimately be forced to consider much more severe reductions, including cuts to positions and programs that many people were working hard to protect. While acknowledging that the strategy amounted to a gamble, she indicated she was willing to take that risk in hopes of preserving educational opportunities and maintaining the quality of the district's programs. Mrs. Cowan also stressed the importance of community involvement, noting that board members are limited in what they can do to advocate for a budget. She emphasized that supporters of the schools would need to play an active role in educating voters and encouraging participation.

Mr. Roraback remarked that Region 13's reputation for strong schools is an important asset for students, families, and the broader community, and preserving that reputation requires public engagement and support.

Dr. Leggett responded with a concern about how voters who previously rejected the budget might perceive such a small reduction. She questioned whether a \$100,000.00 cut would be viewed as a meaningful response to the referendum results and worried that some residents could see it as dismissive or insufficient. Dr. Darcy noted that similar criticisms had been raised after the board's earlier reduction of approximately \$238,000.00, with some voters arguing that the change was too small to address their concerns.

Mr. Moore observed that there appeared to be stronger support among board members for retaining the Director of Teaching and Learning position than he had initially expected. He noted that preserving the position would allow the district to maintain dedicated curriculum leadership while also benefiting from the work already being done by existing administrators. Given the apparent support for keeping the director role, he suggested that if a staffing reduction became necessary, the district-wide learner-centered coach position might be the more likely option for consideration.

There was also discussion about club stipends. Mr. Moore noted that some club stipends exist in the budget even when there is no active advisor or participation, meaning that the funds are allocated but not necessarily spent. As a result, he discussed whether unused stipends could be removed or left unfilled as a way to generate savings without directly affecting students or staff currently participating in programs. There was also discussion about reviewing the overall stipend budget to determine how much funding might be available through vacant or inactive positions.

Mrs. Cowan asked whether eliminating unused stipends from the budget could create problems if interest in a program unexpectedly increased during the school year. Using freshman girls' basketball as an example, she wondered what would happen if a team was not budgeted because there were not enough participants, but a sufficient number of students later expressed interest. Dr. Leggett explained that athletics presents unique considerations because of equity requirements. In the case of sports, decisions

must comply with Title IX obligations, meaning that opportunities for male and female students must be treated fairly and consistently. If there were enough student interest to support a team and funding became available, the district would need to consider those equity requirements when determining how to proceed.

Mrs. Neubig also clarified that athletic stipends and after-school club stipends operate differently. Athletic coaching stipends are tied to specific positions with established compensation amounts, while extracurricular clubs have greater flexibility. New clubs can be proposed during the year, and stipend amounts can be determined based on the nature of the activity and available resources.

As the discussion neared a conclusion, Mr. Moore proposed a solution that would preserve the Director of Teaching and Learning position while eliminating one instructional coaching position and incorporating approximately \$100,000.00 in additional reductions. Mrs. Neubig calculated that this approach would reduce the budget increase to approximately 3.35% gross and 3.16% net, resulting in a proposed budget of \$43,969,710.

Before a motion was made, Dr. Leggett expressed concern about the message the community might take away from the board's decision. She noted that the board had worked hard to preserve kindergarten, English, intervention, music, and other student-facing positions, but cautioned that residents should not interpret those decisions as meaning the budget battle was over. She reminded everyone that once the board voted, neither the administration nor the board could actively advocate for the budget, and she worried that supporters might become complacent and fail to vote. Dr. Leggett stressed that preserving programs and positions only matters if voters ultimately approve the budget and warned that another defeat could force the district into much more severe reductions.

Mrs. Petrella sought clarification regarding the instructional coach positions. Dr. Leggett clarified that learner-centered coach positions and the building-based instructional coaches are all part of the same category.

The conversation also touched briefly on per-pupil spending and regional school district costs. Dr. Leggett noted that comparisons to other districts can be misleading because regional school districts bear responsibilities that municipal school systems often do not. Unlike districts in single-town systems, Region 13 must fund and manage its own facilities, grounds maintenance, snow removal, utilities, and infrastructure costs, all of which contribute to higher per-pupil expenditures.

Board members discussed community outreach efforts and the importance of voter education. Mrs. Petrella referenced informational materials distributed in another district that explained both the current budget proposal and the potential consequences of future budget failures. She suggested that community organizations and parent groups could play a similar role in sharing factual information about what is at stake, particularly because the board and administration would be restricted in what they could say after the vote.

*Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Cowan, to adopt a budget for \$43,969,710.00.*

Mr. Moore reflected on the importance of community support and voter turnout. He expressed hope that parents, students, and community groups would continue advocating for the budget, emphasizing that

preserving programs such as music and athletics during the board's deliberations did not guarantee their survival. Mrs. Petrella stressed that nothing was truly protected until the budget passed at referendum and encouraged supporters to remain engaged and encourage others to vote.

Dr. Leggett also sought to put the budget reductions into perspective. She pointed out that when the cuts made after the first referendum were combined with additional state education funding, the district was now proposing a budget that was nearly three-quarters of a million dollars lower than where the process began. Mrs. Neubig stated while percentage changes may appear small, she noted that because Region 13's budget exceeds \$43 million, even a one-percent change represents roughly \$439,000.00. As a result, reductions of one-half percent or less may sound modest but actually reflect substantial dollar amounts and meaningful budget adjustments.

The discussion also addressed a misconception circulating in the community regarding additional state education funding. Mr. Roraback clarified that the newly received state funds were not simply extra money flowing directly into the district's operating budget. Instead, the funds were directed to the towns to help offset the local cost of education. While the money ultimately benefits the school system because it must be used for educational purposes, it does not automatically increase the district's spending authority or eliminate the need for budget decisions.

*All in favor of accepting the proposed budget for \$43,969,710.00 as presented: Mr. Konstantino-Aye; Mrs. Cowan-Aye; Mrs. Caramanello-Aye; Mrs. Petrella-Aye; Dr. Darcy-Aye; Mr. Moore-Aye, Mr. Roraback-Aye; and Mr. Simmons-Nay. Motion passed by majority vote.*

**B. Schedule a District Meeting to present the District's revised 2026-2027 fiscal year budget and to approve the warning of the District Meeting and Referendum Vote.**

Regional School District 13 of the State of Connecticut, Durham, and Middlefield. Warning: a district meeting and referendum vote. Notices hereby given to all those eligible to vote in town meetings in the member towns of Durham and Middlefield that a district meeting of Regional School District 13 of the State of Connecticut will be held on June 17, 2026, at 7:00 p. m. in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School, 135 Picket Lane, Durham, Connecticut, for the following purpose: To present the proposed budget for the 2026-2027 fiscal year as prepared by the Regional School District 13 Board of Education. The moderator shall adjourn the district meeting as conclusion, and the budget shall be submitted to a vote upon the voting tabulators in the district's member towns of Durham and Middlefield on June 18, 2026, in accordance with Section 10-51 of the Connecticut General Statutes between the hours of 6 a.m. and 8:00 p. m. under the following heading. Shall the proposed budget of \$43,969,710.00 for the 2026-2027 fiscal year as prepared and presented by the Regional School District 13 Board of Education be approved? Those in favor shall vote yes. Those opposed shall vote no. Voting will be at the following polling places. Town of Durham, Durham Community Center, 144 Pickett Lane, Durham, Connecticut. Town of Middlefield, Middlefield Community Center, 405 Main Street, Middlefield, Connecticut. Copies of explanatory text about the pending referendum will be mailed to every postal patron in Durham and Middlefield. Dated on this day, 6-8-26. Signed by Robert Moore, Chairman.

*Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Petrella, to schedule a District Meeting to present the District's revised 2026-2027 fiscal year budget and to approve the warning of the District Meeting and Referendum Vote as presented.*

*All in favor of accepting the proposal to schedule a District Meeting to present the District's revised 2026-2027 fiscal year budget and to approve the warning of the District Meeting and Referendum Vote as presented: Mrs. Petrella, Mrs. Cowan, Mr. Simmons, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Darcy, Mrs. Caramanello, and Mr. Konstantino. Motion passed.*

Before moving into public comment, Mr. Roraback asked if the board could provide clarification on why the district meeting and referendum were being scheduled on a Wednesday and Thursday rather than following the more familiar pattern of a Monday district meeting followed by a Tuesday vote. He noted that many residents were likely confused by the unusual schedule and felt it was important to explain the reasoning publicly.

In response, Dr. Leggett explained that the timing was driven by legal notice requirements and a desire to resolve uncertainty as quickly as possible. The district must provide a minimum amount of public notice before a referendum can be held, including publishing the required legal notices in the newspaper within specific timelines. After accounting for those statutory requirements and publication schedules, the Wednesday district meeting followed by a Thursday referendum was the earliest legally permissible option.

Dr. Leggett emphasized that the district intentionally selected the first available date because many people were affected by the ongoing uncertainty. Employees were waiting to learn whether their positions would be retained, labor agreements remained unresolved, and town officials were trying to finalize tax rates and budget planning. Extending the process any longer would only prolong that uncertainty for staff, families, and municipal leaders.

Board members also explained that previous referendum dates had been coordinated with the towns. The first referendum followed the traditional statutory schedule, while the second referendum date had been selected in consultation with local officials. At this stage, however, the district had reached a point where it needed to move forward as quickly as the law allowed. Dr. Leggett stressed that the chosen schedule was not arbitrary but rather the earliest practical opportunity to bring the budget back to voters while minimizing disruption and uncertainty.

## **Public Comment**

### **A. In-person public comment**

Elizabeth Shoudy, a Durham resident, reminded the board of a previous budget cycle during the tenure of a former superintendent when a proposed budget was defeated but was subsequently sent back to voters without significant changes. She recalled that district leaders and community advocates believed the defeat was due in part to a lack of public understanding about the budget rather than opposition to its contents. As a result, community members organized a grassroots effort to educate residents and increase

voter participation. Ms. Shoudy noted that she and others worked extensively to encourage turnout and felt that those efforts ultimately helped generate broader community engagement.

Drawing a parallel to the current situation, Ms. Shoudy said she was encouraged to see more visible support for the schools in the days leading up to the most recent referendum, including campaign signs advocating for passage of the budget. She expressed a willingness to once again help organize community outreach efforts and offered to distribute signs strategically throughout town. Ms. Shoudy encouraged residents who support the schools to work together, share ideas, and actively engage with voters.

She also suggested that supporters use local community social media pages and online forums to provide positive, factual information about the schools and the budget. While acknowledging that board members and administrators face restrictions on advocacy, she emphasized that community members do not have those same limitations and can play an important role in educating voters and encouraging participation.

Craig Bradanini, President of the Regional School District 13 Education Association, addressed the board to acknowledge the difficult work undertaken by board members, administrators, staff, and community members throughout the budget process. He recognized the complexity of the decisions facing the district and expressed appreciation for the thoughtful consideration being given to balancing financial realities with the educational needs of students. Mr. Bradanini noted that the current budget proposal reflects the fiscal challenges confronting the district while also demonstrating an effort to preserve the programs and services that students depend on.

He emphasized that even a single staffing reduction carries significant consequences. Behind every position, he said, is an educator or professional who supports students, builds meaningful relationships, and contributes to the overall success of the schools. While acknowledging the need for responsible budgeting, he stressed the importance of understanding the human impact of staffing decisions and ensuring that any reductions are approached carefully to minimize disruption to student learning and support services.

Mr. Bradanini stated that the Education Association supports responsible fiscal stewardship and recognizes the need to balance taxpayer concerns with the educational mission of the district. At the same time, he argued that community members should be fully informed about the choices being made and the long-term importance of investing in public education. He encouraged residents to become actively engaged in the process and to participate in the upcoming referendum.

Concluding his remarks, Mr. Bradanini urged all eligible voters to cast ballots on June 18, emphasizing that the future strength of Regional School District 13 depends on an informed and involved community. He thanked the board for its continued commitment to students and for its efforts to navigate a difficult budget process while maintaining a focus on educational quality and student success.

Oanh Stefan, speaking on behalf of the Parents of Performers (POPS), thanked the board for listening to the concerns raised by the music community. She specifically expressed appreciation for the board's support of the district's music programs and for considering the feedback provided by parents, students, and community members throughout the budget process.

Dr. Stefan explained that her primary concern was not simply the amount of money involved, but where proposed reductions were being made. She argued that relatively small savings, such as the approximately \$6,500.00 associated with the jazz band and jazz club stipends, should not come from student-facing programs when there are many other operational and non-instructional budget lines available for review. In her view, cuts that directly affect students, opportunities, and educational experiences should be avoided whenever possible, especially when the savings involved represent a very small portion of a budget exceeding \$43 million.

Drawing on her own experience managing budgets professionally, Dr. Stefan acknowledged the complexity of the district's financial situation and recognized the extensive work that administrators and finance staff had invested in developing the proposal. She specifically noted that she did not envy the responsibility of balancing competing priorities while trying to maintain fiscal responsibility. Ms. Stefan concluded by urging the board to continue listening to community feedback and exploring savings in other budget areas.

### **B. Remote public comment**

Amanda Betty, a Durham resident and parent of children in the district, offered several observations and concerns based on the board's discussion. She first addressed comments about potentially relying on PTOs to help fund field trips, noting that parent organizations are already struggling to recruit volunteers and sustain participation. She explained that PTO leadership positions have become increasingly difficult to fill and argued that if the district expects PTOs to take on additional financial responsibilities, it must also recognize and support the challenges those organizations face. While acknowledging that field trip funding remained in the budget, she pointed out that parents ultimately pay for these experiences one way or another, either through taxes, fundraising, or direct out-of-pocket costs, and suggested that the district continue examining whether those funds could be used elsewhere.

Ms. Betty also encouraged the board to engage more directly with district staff when considering future budget priorities. She emphasized that the feedback provided by teachers and staff extends beyond the current budget debate and includes valuable insight into what the district needs to improve educational outcomes over the long term. She cautioned that some employees may be reluctant to publicly advocate for specific positions or programs because they work for the district and may feel uncomfortable speaking openly about budget decisions affecting their colleagues.

Turning to athletics, Ms. Betty questioned whether there might be opportunities for families to contribute financially toward sports programs, similar to participation fees used in some districts. She cited her own experience with school athletics and suggested that some parents might be willing to help offset costs, particularly when equipment or uniforms are outdated. While not presenting a formal proposal, she encouraged the board to consider whether user fees or partial cost-sharing models could help preserve programs without reducing educational services.

Ms. Betty expressed strong support for retaining the Director of Teaching and Learning position, noting that she had advocated for the role in the past and was pleased to hear that it remained in the budget proposal. However, her most significant concern centered on student support services, particularly in the elementary schools. She described seeing a growing number of students with significant behavioral and

emotional needs and said that classroom disruptions frequently require entire classes to be relocated so instruction can continue while staff address individual situations. Drawing on her experiences as both a parent and school volunteer, she stressed that support staff play a critical role in maintaining safe and productive learning environments. She questioned what would happen if those positions were reduced and urged the board to consider the day-to-day realities faced by teachers and students when evaluating staffing decisions.

In response to Ms. Betty's concerns, Dr. Leggett clarified that no ABA staff positions had been eliminated as part of the budget reductions. Ms. Betty acknowledged the clarification but raised a related concern. While the positions themselves may not have been eliminated, she argued that changes to employee contracts, benefits, vacation time, or other working conditions could still lead staff members to leave the district. She noted that she was already aware of at least one individual who had resigned and suggested that the practical impact of staffing changes is not limited to formal position reductions. Mrs. Betty stated she has noticed many behavior problems when in the schools that her children have been exposed to.

### **Adjournment**

*Mrs. Cowan made a motion, seconded by Dr. Darcy, to adjourn the meeting.*

*All in favor of adjourning the meeting: Mrs. Petrella, Mrs. Cowan, Mr. Simmons, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Darcy, Mrs. Caramanello, and Mr. Konstantino. Motion passed and the meeting adjourned.*

Respectfully submitted by Meghan Shortell-Fratantonio