

Board of Education and Durham and Middlefield Boards of Selectmen

Regional School District 13 Board of Education met jointly in a special session with the Durham and Middlefield Boards of Selectmen on Wednesday, December 10, 2025 at 5:00 p.m. in the library Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board of Education Members Present: Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Petrella, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Simmons, Mrs. Cowan, and Mr. Konstantino

Board of Education Members Absent: Mrs. Caramanello, Mr. DelVecchio, and Mr. Stone

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

Middlefield Board of Selectmen Member Present: Mr. Yamartino

Middlefield Board of Finance Members Present: Ms. McNamara and Mr. Skelps (entered 5:30)

Durham Board of Selectmen Present: Mr. Rea and Mr. Hennick

Mr. Moore called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

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

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

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Regional School District 13 Budget Schedule

Mrs. Neubig outlined the district's budget process, which begins each October with the Board of Education reviewing the budget calendar and schools receiving electronic materials for zero-based budgeting. Schools enter regular operating needs and separate new proposals into the software and salary projections are generated electronically based on contracts. Town allocations, calculated in late October using the five-year rolling average model, are shared with both towns along with the budget schedule. By December 5, all school budgets are submitted for administrative review, where proposals are evaluated and routine annual costs are added using consortium pricing and supplier agreements.

On January 24, the Board of Education will attend a retreat focused on the budget and strategic planning. On January 30, the administrative team and superintendent will finalize the budget draft for presentation. At the February 25 meeting, the budget is presented by the superintendent to the Board of Education,

where members can ask follow up questions and schedule additional work sessions to address questions or areas of concern. Budget work sessions are scheduled for March 11, and on March 18. There is another Finance Committee meeting to review the budget in consideration of the town budgets. The Board of Education will finalize the proposed budget and prepare for the public hearing. On April 1 there is a public hearing to present the budget, in which public feedback may lead the board to adjust the budget before sending it to referendum. Following the hearing, the district prepares a mailer sent to all households, containing all required state-mandated information. This typically goes out by late April. On May 4, there is a district meeting to inform the public and present the finalized proposed budget. On May 5, residents vote on the finalized district budget.

After Mrs. Neubig's review of the budget process, the board of selectmen from Middlefield and Durham discussed broader capital needs and long-term planning in their towns. Durham has had to draw heavily from undesignated fund balance in recent cycles (over \$2M in the most recent year), which is not sustainable in the long-term. Durham also has infrastructure that needs to be addressed, like roads and culverts. Middlefield's largest budget items include a health insurance increase of 14% for employees. Previous attempts to secure better rates faced pushback from some unions; the town expects similar challenges this year. Additionally, Middlefield successfully issued a \$12.5M bond for the firehouse.

Board of Education members also discussed the impact of lack of federal and state funding, especially in the implementation of educational mandates. The district currently faces approximately 42 unfunded mandates in special education alone. Town officials requested early notification whenever new mandates arise to allow for coordinated advocacy with state legislators.

Members continued to discuss funding, identifying that the district currently has a \$20M BAN for construction cash flow, receiving the highest bond rating possible. The funds are held in a high yield money market account.

Discussion continued to address the financial impact of Memorial School closing. Members discussed their understanding that the building must still be heated and maintained during construction and snow removal will continue. There will not be any major staff reductions in the 26-27 budget as the needs in the remaining four schools remains. Staffing will again be discussed in the 27-28 budget development process with the completion of the Memorial project. The closure of the schools will reduce future capital and operating expenses, there will not be noticeable savings in this current year budget attributed to the project.

The Board also addressed the usefulness of comparing budget increases with neighboring or similar districts. Some members caution that comparisons can be misleading because regional vs. local districts have different cost structures and that student populations and demographics vary. Other members value budget comparisons as a baseline, not a prescriptive benchmark.

Town officials appreciated being invited to discuss budget issues and made suggestions that both Boards of Finance (Durham & Middlefield) would be included early and often in the process. Dr. Leggett identified that board of finance members were invited to the November meeting and will be invited to the next joint meeting scheduled for March 18.

Some BOF members were unaware of the prior invitation, so board members discussed the need for stronger communication.

Disposition of Brewster and Lyman Schools

Discussion continued on the future closure of Brewster School and John Lyman School.

Both properties present different legal and logistical circumstances, including deed restrictions, town obligations, and potential future uses.

Brewster has notable deed restrictions and covenants. As long as the district operates Brewster for an educational purpose, ownership remains with the district. If the school is officially closed and no longer used for education, the Town of Durham holds the right to purchase the property for \$1.50. The town has six months to decide. There may be flexibility to extend that period to allow for community voting if necessary. Discussion emphasized the need to determine whether the Board intends to retain ownership or allow the town to take possession.

John Lyman does not have similar deed restrictions as Brewster. Middlefield has begun internal discussions about potential uses for Lyman, engaging the Economic Development Committee, the Board of Selectmen, and other boards and commissions. Middlefield plans to hold an all-boards meeting in late January to gather input on whether the town wishes to assume ownership, future use options, and zoning limitations (currently residential zoning; some suggested uses may require rezoning or requesting a waiver through the AG's office).

The establishment of a small joint committee between the towns and the Board of Education was recommended to maintain regular communication, develop options and scenarios, address legal, zoning, and financial considerations, and identify potential future users (e.g., ACES, private schools, childcare providers, though zoning may pose challenges).

Middlefield representatives shared updates from discussions with the Connecticut Green Bank. State incentives have shifted to prioritize school solar installations. "Behind-the-meter" systems (e.g., at the high school) offer the most benefit. Potential exists to re-evaluate solar capacity at Memorial School and other district buildings. Green Bank can assist with scoping, analysis, and incentive guidance at no cost. The district noted that the new building is designed structurally to support solar, though solar is not included in current construction.

Middlefield publishes a quarterly town newsletter and invited the school district to provide a full page for updates. Deadlines typically fall about two weeks before March, June, September, and December editions. The district expressed interest in submitting regular updates.

The district encouraged participation in the ongoing strategic planning survey and noted availability of paper copies in town halls and libraries. The district is also seeking focus group volunteers.

Public Comment

Michael Skelps, Middlefield Board of Finance member, expressed concern that the rising school budget is not aligned with declining student enrollment and emphasized the need for a fiscally responsible

approach. Mr. Skelps asked that the Board pursue all reasonable savings so the Board of Finance can more readily support the upcoming budget, ultimately benefiting the referendum process.

Ms. McNamara read a letter on behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Elder, who are requesting the Board's support for incorporating solar panels into the new Memorial School construction and future projects. They encouraged the Board to integrate expanded solar capacity into building plans as a way to reduce energy costs and environmental impact.

Online Public Comment: Eileen Buckheit, newly elected Chair of the Durham Board of Finance, introduced herself and noted she had not been aware of the November joint meeting but expects to receive notifications going forward. She expressed appreciation that the Boards of Education, Finance, and Selectmen are meeting more regularly, as she had encouraged this collaboration at last year's hearing. Durham's budget season will begin in January, and the town is facing significant capital needs and may consider bonding in the coming year, though no decisions have been made. Drawing on her experience as a former Board of Education member, she acknowledged the difficulty of making cuts given the district's substantial fixed and mandated costs. She did not request reductions but expressed her commitment to ongoing communication and participation in future meetings.

Adjournment

Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mr. Roraback, to adjourn the meeting.

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

Respectfully submitted by Meghan Shortell-Fratantonio