

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Finance Committee met in regular session on Wednesday, March 18, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. in the library at Coginchaug High School.

Finance Committee Members Present: Mrs. Cowan, Mr. Moore, and Mrs. Opalacz (arrived 5:02)

Finance Committee Members Absent: Mr. Neidhardt, Mrs. Caramanello, Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Konstantino, and Mr. Stone.

Board of Education Members Present: Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, and Mr. Simmons (arrived 5:08).

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

Board of Finance Members Present: Mr. Skelps, Chairman of Middlefield Board of Finance, Ms.

Buckheit, Chair of Durham Board of Finance, and Mr. Muzio, Vice Chair of Durham Board of Finance and Chuck Stengel.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Approval of Agenda

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Petrella, to approve the agenda as presented.

All in favor of approving the agenda as presented: Mrs. Cowan and Mr. Moore. Motion passed.

Approval of Minutes – November 12, 2025

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Petrella, to approve the November 12, 2025 meeting minutes as presented.

All in favor of approving the November 12, 2025 meeting minutes as presented: Mr. Moore and Mrs. Petrella. Mrs. Cowan abstained. By majority vote, motion passed.

2026-2027 Budget Discussion

Dr. Leggett presented the committee with the proposed budget, which includes a gross increase of 4.41%, which is a proposed net increase of 4.78%. The proposed budget reductions include a .5 PE health teacher, a .5 administrative assistant to the athletic director, as well 1 FTE of a grade one teacher, 1 FTE of a music teacher, 1 FTE of a speech language pathologist, and 1 FTE of a social worker position. The social worker position was previously grant funded and is being reduced due to the grant funds ending

this year. The only proposed addition to the budget is 1 FTE library media specialist, allowing both the middle school and high school to each have a full-time specialist.

Mrs. Neubig presented on capital expenses, reporting that school districts can allocate up to 2% of their budget for capital improvements. This year the district is allocating 1% to ease budget pressures. The board has prioritized funding needs in recent years and will need to begin discussions regarding an upcoming bond project anticipated for FY 228-29 for full roof replacements at both Cuginchaug and Strong schools. To date, funding has not been reserved for the project, as the amount needed exceeds the ability of the Board to reserve the funds.

The current 1% (\$400,000) set-aside is allocated to ongoing and future needs, including the following: HVAC-related glycol replacement, a new automated bleacher system, athletic field maintenance and future turf replacement, reserves for track replacement, chiller and pump systems, and unanticipated building repairs and maintenance (reduced to \$100,000 due to nearing facility transitions).

Mrs. Opalacz questioned if the tennis courts were included as an expenditure in this year's budget. Dr. Leggett clarified that originally, \$400,000 (the remaining 1% of the allowable 2% capital savings) was set aside for a short-term tennis court repair planned for next year. That proposal has been removed to help lower the overall budget. Instead, the district proposed delaying the repair and including the tennis courts in a future bond project (possibly alongside roofing work). A larger, \$1 million reconstruction using post-tension construction would be done instead. While more expensive upfront, this option would last about 30 years, compared to about 8 years for the \$400,000.00 temporary fix.

Mr. Roraback also asked Mrs. Neubig to clarify the mason repairs at Strong. Mrs. Neubig reported that repairs are still needed. They are included in the district's five-year capital plan and there is potential for the work to be bundled into the future bond project.

Committee members also discussed the proposed bleacher automation system. Mrs. Neubig replied that the system is needed as manually operating the bleachers is physically demanding and potentially dangerous. The automation would make opening and closing the bleachers easier and safer. Separate from this, the bleachers will also undergo safety inspections to ensure they are structurally sound.

Ms. Buckheit requested an update on the auditorium, inquiring if damage from flooding had been addressed. Mrs. Neubig reported the flooding that affected the auditorium last year has been resolved. The cause was traced to blocked/overgrown drainage that has been cleaned, repaired, and improved. Mr. Moore addressed additional fixes included repaving and regrading areas to redirect water away from the building. Ms. Buckheit stated that the town is planning to address nearby culverts, which may also help prevent future issues. Beyond flooding, Ms. Buckheit acknowledged that the auditorium has significant outdated features, including old AV/sound system, worn seating, and accessibility (ADA) issues, such as steep access. Dr. Leggett addressed that an ADA study is currently underway to evaluate needed improvements. Mrs. Cowan replied that the auditorium is recognized as needing major upgrades, but funding is constrained by the 2% capital limit. Dr. Leggett confirmed the auditorium upgrades are on the long-term capital improvement list and will be part of a broader strategic plan. Mrs. Cowan suggested possibly creative funding solutions (e.g., reserves or bonding) to address large projects like this. Mr. Roraback noted that the music program is highly valuable and tied to strong academic performance, as

well as that facilities and aesthetics can influence whether families stay in the district. Committee members agreed that the auditorium improvement needs are beyond a cosmetic issue and advocated for long-term planning and creative funding options to make necessary improvements.

Discussion shifted to the proposed staffing reductions. Dr. Leggett explained that the district uses zero-based budgeting each year, meaning staffing is evaluated from scratch based on student enrollment (declining overall), program needs, and course offerings. The grade 1 teacher reduction proposal was due to fewer students and declining enrollment. The district proposes reducing the PE/Health (0.5) position by sharing the position between the middle and high school. The music department has 7 FTE positions. The district feels it can reduce a position while maintaining program quality. The Speech language pathologist position would be based on IEP service needs. The reduction in the social worker position is due to the grant-funded position ending. However, Dr. Leggett acknowledged it may be partially restored, depending on board discussion. Dr. Leggett clarified that contracting services (e.g., through community agencies) is not equivalent to having in-house certified staff that can work with all students. The district has social workers across all schools, not just one. The position being cut is a grant-funded role at Lyman (grades 2–4). If that position is eliminated, services would be reallocated across K–12. Staff may need to be shared more across schools, which already happens to some extent.

Mr. Skelps requested an explanation for the budget increase when there were staff reductions. Mrs. Neubig reported that even though there is a net reduction of staff and capital savings dropped from 2% to 1%, the budget still increases due to several factors. One factor is the elimination of the “Vacancy Factor”. In prior years when there was a larger fund balance, the district intentionally under-budgeted salaries (e.g., funding only 98%) assuming vacancies and turnover would save money. That strategy no longer works because there are fewer vacancies and less turnover recently as well as the depletion of the fund balance. Now the district is budgeting salaries at 100%, which increases the budget by about 1.2% and prevents the dependence on accessing the limited fund balance. Another factor is contractual salary increases (1.15%) Staff receive increases due to step increases (years of service), lane changes (additional education like master’s degrees), and Union-negotiated raises (GWI). These are built-in cost increases, even without adding staff. Finally, health insurance costs (38%) is another contributor to budget increase, as rising benefits costs add to the overall increase. Additionally, the net budget increased more than expected because the district previously had a fund balance available to offset increases. Now that the fund balance has been purposely utilized over the past few years, there are less funds to offset costs, resulting in a higher net budget.

A concern was raised that teacher-to-student ratios appear very low, resulting in small class sizes. Mrs. Cowan reported that 88 classes have fewer than 10 students and 192 classes have fewer than 15 students. Members shared that many small classes exist intentionally to preserve AP courses and specialized programs. Mr. Roraback identified the struggle the district faces, offering AP/college classes as well as pathways that support career-focused or trade options. Dr. Leggett stated that every department was reviewed for potential reductions using zero-based budgeting. Reductions were only possible without significantly affecting programming. Only the English department had a potential area for reduction; other areas, especially AP and specialized classes, were protected.

Committee members also discussed the impact of savings based on the consolidation of the elementary schools. Consolidation of elementary schools will reduce overhead, but savings in staff salaries may be less immediate. For example, two library media specialists may still be needed for a consolidated school of 700 students. Consolidation savings will likely be realized in FY 27–28, not immediately, due to temporary housing costs and transition needs. Merging classes can increase class sizes in lower grades, yielding some savings. Specialized areas (art, music, etc.) may have larger class sizes without affecting regular education. Mrs. Opalacz established private schools can utilize online platforms to combine students across locations, which is currently a potential area for savings that public schools can't yet use. It was noted that Connecticut regulations do not allow consortium-based online AP or advanced classes across schools.

Before the meeting adjourned, Mrs. Neubig continued her answer to Mr. Skelp's question. Debt service comprises 1.44% of the budget, but this is existing debt, nothing new. This was paid from bond proceeds in the capital reserve fund the last 2 budget cycles to utilize bond premium as well as to lower the budget. The budget also shows reductions in facilities, supplies, capital, and dues/fees help offset costs. The excess cost grant is conservatively budgeted at 60% of expected revenue due to historical shortfalls in State funding of the grant.

Discussion returned to the proposed budget, as Mrs. Opalacz questioned if class sizes had remained unchanged. Dr. Leggett confirmed class sizes were unchanged, and the proposed elimination of the grade one teacher was purely due to enrollment decline, not instructional policy. Mrs. Opalacz also questioned the necessity of a high school media specialist, noting that older students are generally independent and rarely interact with the library. Mrs. Opalacz feels the role is more critical for younger students learning how to use resources, observing that in high school, students often don't use physical books. Dr. Leggett responded that in her experience as a high school teacher, a strong library media specialist at the middle and high school levels can significantly enhance instruction. They support research, inquiry, and curriculum rigor, help students develop data and media literacy (especially with AI), and teach executive functions in middle school. Regular library media rotations could positively impact all content areas, making this proposed addition a major instructional advantage.

Mrs. Opalacz encouraged the committee members that the proposed media specialist role is clearly explained to the public, with Ms. Buckheit noting past attempts to remove or adjust the position had caused community backlash. Currently, one specialist is split between the middle and high schools (0.5 FTE each). The proposal would make it one full-time specialist at each school, which is expected to positively impact instruction across all areas. Mr. Simmons noted the previous presentation from Ms. Lussier who outlined the benefits of the library media specialist for committee members to reference. Mr. Roraback also shared interest in tracking measurable outcomes if the position is approved.

Mrs. Neubig continued discussion, reporting on the projected costs to towns. The projected town costs are outlined using the five-year average method: Durham is responsible for 65.38% (slightly down from last year) and Middlefield 34.62% (slightly up). Durham's share totals an estimated \$26 million, an increase of \$1183,861, and Middlefield is estimated at \$12 million, up \$752,683. Changes to the governor's proposed ECS grant could offset some increases, but details are uncertain. The group notes potential ECS adjustments and emphasizes monitoring them for the next fiscal year as well. Mrs. Opalacz noted the district's budget often appears higher in comparisons to other districts, suggesting a budget comparison to

other regional school district, emphasizing that staffing is driven by educational needs rather than cost, and that understanding the composition for a student body of about 1,300, from pre-K through high school, helps put costs in context. The committee members discussed that comparisons to other regional districts show slightly higher expenses (around \$900 more per student). While pre-K–8 comparisons are straightforward, high school costs are harder to benchmark because of unique programs like block scheduling. Consolidation of Memorial is expected to bring costs more in line with other regional districts. Yet, capital expenses and other regional factors also contribute to higher overall costs.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Adjournment

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Petrella, to adjourn the meeting.

All in favor of adjourning the meeting: Mrs. Cowan, and Mrs. Opalacz. Motion passed and the meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted by Meghan Shortell-Fratantonio