

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a special meeting on Monday, May 11, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

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

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

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**

*Mrs. Cowan 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**

Elizabeth Shoudy from Durham said there wasn't a single major issue driving her concerns, aside from the school naming decision, which she felt had already been well-addressed through voting opportunities. Ms. Shoudy noted confusion and concern in the community about the ABA position, with many people not understanding that the change wouldn't be harmful and mistakenly thinking it threatened staff jobs. As someone with 20 years of experience, Ms. Shoudy emphasized the value of ABA but also expressed interest in the plan. Ms. Shoudy also observed low voter turnout, attributing it to lack of awareness or reminders, noting that many people either forgot or didn't realize when voting was happening. While some older residents indicated they would vote no regardless, Ms. Shoudy didn't see widespread strong opposition. Ms. Shoudy suggested a need for better communication and engagement, especially encouraging parents to participate.

### **2026-2027 Budget**

#### **A. Discussion of Referendum Results from May 5, 2026**

Mr. Moore discussed the May 5, 2026 referendum results, noting a recurring pattern where Durham tends to vote in favor while Middlefield often votes against, though this time Middlefield's opposition was especially strong. Mr. Moore emphasized that there is very little clear feedback explaining why people voted the way they did. Some reasons that surfaced included opposition tied to the school naming issue, despite it not being a budget matter, concerns about specific positions like the library media specialist,

and some confusion or indirect feedback regarding the ABA role. Mr. Moore also mentioned input from the finance committee influencing opinions, along with limited feedback suggesting a reduction in instructional coaching positions. Mr. Moore stressed that the lack of consistent and detailed feedback makes it difficult to fully understand the outcome of the referendum.

Dr. Darcy explained that during the budget process, she had advocated to keep positions like the library and curriculum lead roles, with the understanding that if the towns did not support them, the vote would ultimately decide. Dr. Darcy acknowledged that Middlefield, in particular, voted against the budget, and while the budget did not pass, Dr. Darcy emphasized that this outcome reflects how the system is intended to work. Dr. Darcy expressed respect for the process and for the voice of the community, noting that adjustments will be made moving forward. Dr. Darcy also encouraged residents to communicate directly with their representatives during the budget process, rather than after the fact, so concerns can be addressed earlier. Dr. Darcy stressed the importance of hearing directly from community members through official channels like emails or calls, rather than relying on secondhand feedback.

Mrs. Cowan echoed Dr. Darcy's sentiments, emphasizing that while it can be difficult for people to attend meetings, community feedback is essential and can be as simple as sending a quick email. Mrs. Cowan stressed that without direct input, decision-makers are left to make assumptions about what the community wants, which they try to avoid. Mrs. Cowan also noted surprise at the last-minute surge of concern about the ABA position, explaining that misinformation had spread suggesting services were being cut, when in reality, the change was only related to staffing structure, not a reduction in services.

Dr. Leggett clarified that the change to the ABA positions involves shifting them from 12-month employees with paid vacation to 10-month employees, similar to teacher assistants, in order to reduce costs during tight budget times. Previously, ABAs were scheduled and paid over the summer even when students were not present. Dr. Leggett emphasized that ABAs are highly valued and that no student services are being cut; rather, this is strictly a staffing model adjustment. Additionally, many ABAs will still work during the summer for extended school year programs, but under separate contracts rather than as part of a year-round salaried position.

Mr. Roraback emphasized that timing played a major role in the referendum outcome, noting that rising costs, such as higher gas prices, are making people more sensitive to any potential increases. In Middlefield, visible developments like new buildings may have reinforced the perception that taxes will rise, even if those projects were necessary. Mr. Roraback pointed out that the town has benefited from long periods without tax increases, which has helped many older residents remain in their homes, and there is concern about pricing them out. Mr. Roraback highlighted the challenge of balancing the need to provide a strong quality of education with the responsibility to keep the community affordable, particularly for elderly residents.

Mrs. Petrella noted that there was little to no feedback from the community or finance committee during public hearings. However, more recent input, shared through Middlefield's First Selectman, Bob Yamartino, and a direct community contact, suggests that the primary concern was the size of the proposed budget increase.

Mrs. Petrella also referenced suggestions that had surfaced, particularly around potentially reducing instructional coaching positions. Reviewing staffing, Mrs. Petrella noted there are about 5.6 instructional coaches and questioned whether, given the district's experienced staff and several years of coaching support, these roles should be reevaluated. Mrs. Petrella clarified that interventionists, who work directly with students, are a different consideration, though still worth monitoring for effectiveness. Mrs. Petrella also asked for clarification on the distinctions between tutors, instructional specialists, and instructional coaches, indicating a need for better understanding of staffing roles overall.

Mr. Brough, Human Resource Specialist for RSD 13, clarified that tutors are part-time, hourly employees who work limited hours and primarily provide one-on-one student support; they are highly qualified but not part of the union or on a salary schedule like teachers. In contrast, interventionists are contracted staff who also work directly with students, with about 13.5 positions focused on student support overall. Mrs. Petrella emphasized that roles directly serving students are a priority, but raised concerns about the number of instructional coaches, suggesting the district should evaluate whether adjustments could be made given the experience level of current staff.

In response, Dr. Leggett explained that there's no direct correlation between coaches and staff expertise, and while a reduction in coaching positions may be considered in the future, particularly with school consolidation, the timing is not appropriate for the upcoming year.

Mr. Konstantino shared that he reviewed roughly a decade of budget voting data and found that there has only been one prior budget rejection, with the second vote in those cases typically showing even lower turnout. Based on this, Mr. Konstantino did not believe the current result was primarily due to poor voter turnout, noting that the numbers appear consistent with other years. Mr. Konstantino noted that the current outcome seems to represent a clear rejection of the budget rather than a turnout issue, and pointed out that the margin of difference in Middlefield was historically the largest seen. Mr. Konstantino also recalled supporting the idea of putting the budget to a vote to gauge community response to staffing levels, and suggested that if the budget is rejected, staffing would be the first area to review moving forward.

Dr. Darcy emphasized the importance of instructional coaches in improving Tier 1 instruction, which she believes reduces the need for additional student interventions later. Dr. Darcy argued that, in the current education environment, with new initiatives, assessments, and evolving instructional demands, teachers do not have enough time to manage all changes on their own. Instructional coaches, in Dr. Darcy's opinion, are essential because they help interpret new requirements and best practices and then support teachers in implementing them effectively in the classroom. Dr. Darcy strongly defended the role of instructional coaches, describing them as a key support system for improving overall instruction and student outcomes, and noted she has consistently supported maintaining these positions, including in past discussions about potential cuts.

Mrs. Cowan requested what the budget would be with the removal of the library media specialist position. Dr. Leggett explained that after a leadership team meeting, two potential budget reductions were identified in response to the referendum outcome and limited public feedback. The first option is delaying the library media specialist position for another year. The second is reducing capital expenses by \$100,000.00, with the caution that this could create risk for aging infrastructure at Brewster and Lyman

schools, particularly boilers and roofs that may require emergency attention. Together, these reductions would bring the budget increase to under 4%, which had previously been suggested as a more acceptable threshold. Dr. Leggett also shared that the district recently received unexpected state funding, which further improves the financial outlook by lowering both gross and net budget figures, with the net now falling below the gross increase.

Mrs. Neubig clarified how recent additional state funding should be presented in the budget. Initially, the funds were shown as ECS-related money flowing to the towns, but after consultation with legal counsel, the district was advised not to label it as ECS to avoid future budget obligation requirements (MBR implications). Instead, the funds should be treated as a grant to the district, even though they come from the same overall source discussed previously.

This reclassification does not change the total amount of funding, but it changes how it is presented in the budget. As a result, about \$215,000.00 in additional funds between Durham and Middlefield can be included in the net increase, which would now be lower than the gross, which is a better shift for taxpayers. Combined with proposed reductions, delaying the library media specialist position and reducing capital spending, the district's budget would drop to a 3.93% gross increase and a 3.75% net increase. Mrs. Neubig also reminded the Board that the public votes on the gross budget figure.

Mrs. Cowan expressed hesitation about reducing \$100,000.00 in capital funding, noting that capital funds are already limited and should ideally be maximized each year. Mrs. Cowan emphasized concern about cutting into long-term maintenance and planning needs. While Mrs. Cowan supported the goal of bringing the budget increase down to around 3.93%, she preferred not to achieve that reduction through capital cuts. Instead, Mrs. Cowan asked whether there were alternative adjustments or swaps that could be considered to reach the same budget target without reducing the capital allocation.

Mrs. Neubig responded that the proposed \$100,000.00 reduction could be achieved by making smaller cuts across various areas. They emphasized that the intent was not to target specific small items, but rather to consider broader reductions across line items.

Mr. Simmons pushed back, stating that this kind of approach could become arbitrary and open-ended, questioning where such reductions would stop. In response, Mrs. Neubig noted that the district operates under a zero-based budgeting approach, meaning the budget is built based on projected needs rather than fixed historical amounts. Mrs. Neubig explained that, based on her experience in the district, departments historically do not spend their full supply budgets. Because of that, she already reduces supply budgets by about 10–15% upfront before presenting them to the board. Mrs. Neubig noted this adjustment is based on reviewing several years of spending data and is intended to reflect actual usage more accurately. Mrs. Neubig added that if one school does end up needing to use its full allocation, it is typically balanced out by other schools not spending their entire budgets, so the overall approach remains consistent and manageable.

Mr. Moore also asked Mrs. Neubig to discuss the process of salary budgeting. Mrs. Neubig explained a past budgeting practice in the district where, during a period of stronger fund balance (around \$2 million), the board intentionally built a deficit into salary budgeting. The idea at the time was to intentionally underbudget the salary line to utilize the larger fund balance that would reduce the budget increase.

However, Mrs. Neubig noted that this approach is no longer sustainable and has already led to financial adjustments, including transferring money from completed capital projects to cover the shortfall. Mrs. Neubig cautioned against relying on salary underfunding as a budgeting strategy going forward, explaining that staffing dynamics, such as sick leave and substitute coverage, often offset any assumed savings. While there may occasionally be some savings from unfilled positions, Mrs. Neubig emphasized that the variability makes it too risky to plan for, especially given past consequences.

Mrs. Cowan clarified Bob Yamartino's question about whether the substitute line item in the budget is too high when staffing is already budgeted at 100%. Mrs. Cowan explained that even when staff are budgeted at full capacity, substitute costs are still necessary because employees on sick leave or vacation continue to be paid while additional funds are required to cover substitute coverage. Mrs. Cowan also noted that the substitute budget is unlikely to decrease and may even need to increase, given ongoing difficulties in recruiting enough substitute teachers, a challenge she described as long-standing and common across many districts, not unique to theirs.

Mr. Simmons shared that this was his first year participating in the budget process from the board side and believes the proposed budget was generally solid. Mr. Simmons expressed reluctance to support any cuts, arguing that reductions often translate directly into reduced services for students. Mr. Simmons specifically pointed to concerns about part-time or split positions like the library media specialist role, suggesting that "0.5" shared positions are not effective for students. Mr. Simmons also reflected on community feedback, noting that while there were some questions and concerns about staffing reductions, overall input seemed relatively positive, though limited. Mr. Simmons emphasized that it is often unclear why people vote against budgets unless they directly explain their reasoning, which makes interpretation difficult.

Additionally, Mr. Simmons strongly opposed using capital funds as a budget adjustment tool, arguing that it feels like "creative accounting" to reach a target number and that capital money is ultimately still needed for future infrastructure costs. He also cautioned that the district is entering a period where difficult financial decisions are unavoidable due to past choices, but expressed discomfort with continued cuts, especially when the overall increase is relatively modest compared to other towns. Finally, Mr. Simmons voiced support for the budget as presented and suggested that broader concerns about taxation and affordability, particularly for seniors, are important but fall outside the district's direct control and relate more to larger societal issues like housing affordability.

In response, Mr. Roraback clarified that his earlier comment about seniors and taxation was intended only as an explanation for why the budget may have been voted down, not to pit groups against each other.

Mrs. Caramanello disagreed with the idea that broader affordability concerns are the main driver of budget outcomes, arguing instead that when the budget is voted down, it is typically because the increase is perceived as too high. Mrs. Caramanello cautioned the board against resubmitting the same budget, suggesting it would likely lead to another unsuccessful vote. Mrs. Caramanello also opposed using capital reserves for budget adjustments, stating it could put the district in a difficult financial position. However, she supported removing the library media specialist position, saying it is not the right year to maintain it. Mrs. Caramanello also expressed concern about cutting frontline instructional supplies or shifting costs onto families. In addition, Mrs. Caramanello raised the idea of restructuring curriculum leadership by

eliminating one of the two director of curriculum positions. She suggested that existing instructional coaches could work collaboratively with a single director to support curriculum needs, arguing that as the district changes in size, maintaining two director-level positions may no longer be justified. Finally, Mrs. Caramanello asked for updated budget figures based on removing both the library media specialist and one director of curriculum.

Mrs. Neubig responded that if the Associate Director of Curriculum and library media specialist positions were removed from the budget, it would result in a 3.74 gross and 3.56 net. Dr. Leggett also clarified that the proposed budget does not include two directors; rather, the budget proposes a Director and Associate Director of Curriculum. Mrs. Caramanello clarified that cutting these positions would not affect student funds; however, Dr. Leggett noted that cutting these positions does, in fact, impact students.

Mr. Moore recalled that around 2016, student performance was low, so the board and superintendent focused on improving teacher readiness by introducing instructional coaches. Within about two years, student achievement rose to the top tier of the district. However, after COVID, performance, particularly in ELA and math, declined and has not fully recovered. Mr. Moore argues that with new state ELA and math requirements being implemented, instructional coaches are still needed to help teachers adjust and align with updated standards, suggesting they were effective in the past and could be again.

Dr. Leggett added that instructional coaches are often misunderstood, but they play a role similar to positions in business that go by other names, such as production managers, quality control or implementation specialists. Dr. Leggett emphasized that these roles support oversight, compliance, and instructional quality, especially with evolving state requirements.

Mrs. Cowan acknowledged that while instructional coaches are a significant budget expense, they are currently necessary given student needs and curriculum demands. There is an agreement that the district can revisit their role in a year or two after further evaluation and after a new curriculum director is in place.

#### B. Discussion of Next Referendum and Budget Proposal

Mr. Moore reviewed the next steps in the budget approval process, in which the board will need to vote on a new budget and set a schedule for referendum, with estimates suggesting that cutting the library media specialist position and an additional \$75,000.00 would reduce the increase to just under 4%. Dr. Leggett established that some capital funds are already committed to high-priority needs, including ADA-related projects and HVAC grant allocations, limiting flexibility for cuts.

Both towns were contacted to confirm availability for organizing the required referendum process. Two date options were proposed: May 27 (district annual meeting) with voting on May 28 and June 1 (district meeting) with voting on June 2. Both towns expressed a preference for the June dates, meaning the likely schedule would shift to the June 1 meeting and June 2 vote.

Mrs. Caramanello questioned if the \$75,000.00 reduction needed to bring the budget increase under 4% will be identified and finalized before the Wednesday vote.

Dr. Leggett confirmed she would prepare and distribute a proposal outlining specific budget changes and their impacts. Mr. Moore reviewed the positions of board members, identifying that Mr. Simmons is already satisfied with the current budget as-is, but if forced, would vote to remove the library media specialist rather than take money out of capital. He remarked that Mrs. Caramanello is comfortable removing two positions (the proposed library media specialist and the associate director of curriculum), and opposes taking money from capital. Additionally, Mr. Moore noted Mrs. Cowan strongly prefers not to reduce capital spending. Mr. Roraback explained that capital funding typically serves as a contingency reserve. If an emergency occurred at schools like Lyman or Brewster and there were no available capital funds, the district would normally go back to the towns to request additional funding through the standard approval process. However, this has not actually been needed in practice. Mrs. Neubig responded that leadership feels confident there is enough money set aside to cover potential urgent issues at Lyman or Brewster, which is part of why they felt comfortable using some of the capital funds elsewhere. While the situation is manageable for another year, it still requires caution and ongoing monitoring.

Mrs. Caramanello also proposed a more phased staffing approach for curriculum support roles. She suggested hiring a highly experienced Director of Curriculum this year, rather than immediately filling multiple related or overlapping positions. The idea is that a strong director might be sufficient on their own to lead curriculum work and provide structure, especially given that these roles and responsibilities have shifted over the past few years. Mrs. Caramanello proposed waiting a year to evaluate how well this single position meets district needs. If, after that period, there is still a demonstrated need and additional resources are available, the district could then consider adding an associate-level position. Mrs. Caramanello concluded by recognizing that instructional coaches remain important and should continue collaborating within this structure.

Mrs. Petrella expressed agreement with Mrs. Caramanello's budget approach and priorities. She stated that in previous years, the district consistently allocated about 2% to capital projects and were satisfied with that level, but this year it was reduced to 1%. Mrs. Petrella is not in favor of further reducing the budget by an additional \$100,000.00, particularly from capital funds. Regarding staffing, Mrs. Petrella suggested that if cuts are necessary, her first preference would be to reduce the library specialist position. For curriculum leadership, Mrs. Petrella supported Mrs. Caramanello's idea of hiring a curriculum director first and then reassessing future staffing needs before adding additional positions.

### **Public Comment**

Mrs. Buckheit asked for clarification about a statement made earlier regarding additional state funding.

Mrs. Neubig clarified that the funding does go to the towns first, but it is restricted: It must be spent on approved educational purposes and then effectively passed through to the district. Mrs. Neubig explained there are three funding streams: funds that stay with the town and can be used more flexibly (e.g., to reduce mill rate), supplemental aid, and temporary aid, which are different from ECS funds but still must be used for education even though they go to the town first. Mrs. Neubig then discussed how to properly categorize this money in the budget. Mrs. Neubig noted that it should not be treated as part of the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) calculation because it is a one-time grant. Mrs. Neubig referenced recent guidance from legal counsel who recommended treating it as a grant and placing it in a specific state funding line rather than labeling it as ECS.

Ms. Opalacz asked whether the social worker position is now funded through a grant or if the cost is still being covered by the general district budget. Dr. Leggett confirmed that the position is still currently included in the budget, and there has been no confirmed update that the grant has been awarded. Dr. Leggett explained that the grant is competitive, so there is no guarantee the district will receive it. Because of that uncertainty, the district cannot rely on it as the sole funding source. However, due to strong community feedback about student mental health needs, the district compromised by including a partial position (0.4 FTE) in the budget. If the grant is awarded, it would help fund or supplement that role.

Lastly, Ms. Opalacz reflected on prior experience working with town leadership and suggested that the board likely already has a realistic sense of how much budget reduction is needed to gain voter support in Middlefield, based on past conversations and expectations. The participant also emphasized that budget approval is not only about cost levels but about mobilizing voter participation, particularly parents. From her experience over many years, she argued that even if the budget is reasonable, it will not pass unless supportive voters actually turn out. Board members addressed that they are also limited in what they can do to encourage voter engagement.

### **Adjournment**

*Mr. Simmons made a motion, seconded by Mr. Konstantino, to adjourn the meeting.*

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

Respectfully submitted by Meghan Shortell-Fratantonio