



Special Education Services



Ms. Lois Pernice, Director of Pupil Services
Ms. Monika Edman, Asst. Director of Pupil Services

24 School Road
Weston, CT 06883

Telephone: 203-291-1405
Fax: 203-291-1423

Special Education Budget

The 2017-2018 school year has been a difficult one due to unforeseen budget pressures in the Out-placement tuition budget line. We are closely monitoring and analyzing the current budget pressures. In response to this budget crisis, the proposed FY 2019 Budget includes specific actions relative to the Out placement tuition budget line, but more generally makes recommended changes to SPED/PPS management and student services. These recommended changes represent a comprehensive effort to mitigate the change for future budget crises and improve the already strong services we provide our students and families.

The immediate budget pressures arose due to a few unusual circumstances last spring that resulted in unanticipated out-placements that continued into the current school year. In addition, there was an increase in mediations last spring and summer that similarly resulted in placements that continued into the current year.

When looking closely at this current deficit, it is important to review that, while this year has reached a significant level, we have been seeing this upward trend over the last several years. Besides what were unforeseen and unavoidable placements, we have had the trend of increased unilateral placements by parents to a variety of private schools. These parents subsequently requested reimbursement for the placements, which leads the district to a formal mediation process in order to resolve the matter. Formal mediation is the step before a full due process hearing and is often where resolution does occur.

It is very difficult to go to a full due process hearing on these cases because of the concern for the possibility of more significant costs. Connecticut is one of a few states in the country where the Burden of Proof is on the school district and not the parents when going to a due process hearing. As a result, if the district does not succeed in the hearing in all areas, the district must pay for the placement resolution determined by the hearing officer and for the parents' attorney fees, plus the district's attorney fees. Additionally, due process hearings have become more complicated over the last several years and are becoming quite lengthy, which increases the amount of preparation and staff time being devoted to the hearing, further driving up costs. Our attorneys have recommended that it is in our best interest to go to mediation, where costs are then shared by the district and the parents. Currently, we are one of many districts experiencing an increase in unilateral placements resulting in mediations; the trend is particularly on the rise in lower Fairfield County districts, including Darien, Greenwich, Wilton and Ridgefield.

In reviewing unilateral placements, we are looking at additional steps we might take to prevent getting to the point of a unilateral placement. However, it is important to understand that parents have the right to make a unilateral placement without consulting the district. We must do all we can to reduce unilateral placements, but other districts that have taken comprehensive steps have found their efforts diminished by the fact that they still must abide by the individual decisions of parents, which by law are substantially protected.

In order to try and reduce this current trend and prevent a similar crisis, as well as provide for the strongest entry into a mediation, we are recommending changes within the management of the Special Education department to provide for more accountability and more efficient and effective

utilization of staff. We also recommending additional staff changes in other areas to provide more specific support for students. The management and student support needs are among the largest we face in the district in terms of proportion of student population and the budget. Currently, over 20% of our total student population requires either an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) through Special Education or a 504 plan through the American with Disabilities Act in order to access their education. Approximately 25 percent of the operating budget is dedicated to SPED/PPS. Therefore for the 2018-19 school year, we are making the following recommendations in order to address the needs of our students.

1. Assistant Pupil Personnel Director:

We are recommending that an additional Assistant Director of Special Education be added. This will allow for one Assistant Director to cover the elementary level (HES and WIS) and one Assistant Director to cover the upper level (MS and HS). The additional assistant director will increase the direct supervision and accountability required to assist staff in addressing the needs of the students. This will also make it possible for the PPS Director to operate more effectively on district-wide accountability and oversight responsibilities. For instance, the PPS Director would be available on a full time basis to address the crisis involving out-placements, as well as manage the department programs and the financial and monitoring details of the out-placements and mediated agreements. Currently the PPS Director has extensive direct involvement in building PPT's and parent meetings and staff supervision, which makes it difficult to be available to address the district needs as a whole.

2. Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA):

We are recommending the addition of another BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst). Another emerging challenge that can result in out-placements and/or mediations is with students who have dysregulated behaviors. In the last two years, we have moved from contracting with an agency to provide behavioral support to hiring our own district BCBA's. This change has been very helpful as it has resulted in daily behavior support being available as well as having staff specifically trained in this area. While school psychologists have some background training in behavior modification, it is not their area of expertise and they are not well positioned to respond to the significant increase of students with dysregulated behavior. With the addition of one BCBA, we can provide this needed support at each of the schools.

Currently we have five school psychologists, one at each school and one who splits time between HES and WIS. We are recommending to eliminate one school psychologist position to offset adding a BCBA position. This will allow for more effective management of students with behavior concerns.

3. Effective School Solutions:

We are recommending that we continue with the Effective School Solutions (ESS) program at the HS. ESS has proven in the last two years that it is able to keep students in district and would likely have helped keep current out-placed students in district if the program had existed prior to last school year. Case in point: we have not had any unilateral outplacements at the HS the last two years, while in previous years we had several each year. (This fact underscores that the current out-placement crisis is not just a HS concern.)

The ESS program provides for intensive clinical programming for students with significant emotional and behavioral problems so they can be maintained within the district. Over the last five to six years, the district has looked at a variety of options in order to try and provide an alternative program for students with these needs. The ESS program allows us to keep these students in our district and affords them a strong education, as well as social and extra-curricular opportunities, that would not be available in an out-placement. Currently a therapeutic day program for students with emotional difficulties costs between \$60-70,000 a year, often not including the summer or related services and does not include transportation costs. A residential program is closer to \$100,000 and out of state programs can be much higher than that, so just 2 placements can pay for the cost of ESS.

4. Middle School and High School Social Workers:

Within the PPS Budget, we are recommending adding a Middle School Social Worker. We are seeing more students with emotional difficulties at the younger grades, in particular grades 5-8. We have seen an increase in parents making unilateral placements at the transition from 5th to 6th as well as in grades 6th-8th. We are recommending to hire an additional school social worker for the MS, who could help increase support for students in need who are transitioning from 5th to 6th grade. This school social worker can provide more direct clinical and family support in order to keep students in district.

The second part of this recommendation is to have the current school social worker position moved full time to the HS, rather than being split between the HS and MS. Providing this additional support at the HS further reduces the load on the school counselors as well as providing more consistent support to students by being assigned to one building.

5. **Certified Counselor at WHS:**

We are recommending the addition of a Certified Counselor to direct WHS's College and Career Center. Explained in detail in the PPS and WHS sections of the budget, the new position would address the increasing demands of the college timetable, the competitive process and the resulting growth in family requests for guidance, coupled with the demands of managing effectively our numerous support programs. These demands necessitate an adjustment to guidance staffing to best serve our students. Our college graduation and success rates are superb, but we must modify our support for students and families if we are going to continue to achieve exceptional college and career outcomes.

We have not come to these recommendations lightly and have consulted with the Cabinet and Principals. All of these administrators are in agreement that with additional administrator accountability and supervision and retooled staffing support for emerging student and family needs, we will be better positioned to head off additional out-placements and mediations. Not only will it help mitigate our current budget crisis for the upcoming years, but it will make our strong services for students and families all that more effective.

An additional area of concern is that in recent years we have under-budgeted the line item allowance for unknown placements. We are recommending that this line item be increased from two to four unknown placements to provide for a cushion within the budget. This should help reduce the chance of a budget overrun that then has to be resolved.

A final initiative deserves attention, which could have a direct implication on the Special Education budget. We have been working within the district to look at a more inclusive model of instruction for students. This was an issue noted in the CES SPED Review (February, 2017) and it is an area that can sometimes impact unilateral placements. Although inclusion (under IDEA) is generally considered the optimal practice, students are reluctant to be "pulled-out" of the regular education classroom, prompting parents to seek smaller specialized schools where the students will all have special education needs and so there is no pull-out class. We have been working closely with the Assistant Superintendent on this issue by providing direct professional development to the staff at the HES and WIS as well as more general PD for all Special Education staff.

Special Education
Weston Public Schools, Weston, CT

<u>2017-2018 Actual</u>				<u>2018-2019 Projected</u>			
<u>Operating Budget FTE</u>	<u>Other Sources FTE</u>	<u>Total FTE</u>	<u>Program</u>	<u>Operating Budget FTE</u>	<u>Other Sources FTE</u>	<u>Total FTE</u>	<u>Change</u>
Certified Staff							
Classroom Teachers							
2.50	0.50	3.00	Pre-School Special Ed and Typical	2.50	0.50	3.00	0.00
4.00	0.00	4.00	Hurlbutt Elementary School	4.00	0.00	4.00	0.00
5.00	0.00	5.00	Weston Intermediate School	5.00	0.00	5.00	0.00
6.00	0.00	6.00	Weston Middle School	6.00	0.00	6.00	0.00
6.00	0.00	6.00	Weston High School	6.00	0.00	6.00	0.00
Total Classroom Teachers							
Special Subject Classroom Teachers							
0.85	0.00	0.85	Adaptive PE K-12	0.85	0.00	0.85	0.00
1.80	0.00	1.80	Project Challenge	1.80	0.00	1.80	0.00
Support Services							
5.00	1.00	6.00	Speech and Language	6.00	0.00	6.00	0.00
2.00	0.00	2.00	BCBA's	3.00	0.00	3.00	1.00
1.00	0.00	1.00	Behavioral Specialist	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
1.00	0.00	1.00	Life Skills/Transition Coordinator	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Total Special Subjects & Support Services Staff							
Administration							
1.00	0.00	1.00	Director of Special Education & Pupil Personnel Ser.	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
1.00	0.00	1.00	Asst. Dir. of Special Education & Pupil Personnel Ser.	2.00	0.00	2.00	1.00
37.15	1.50	38.65		40.15	0.50	40.65	2.00
Non Certified Staff							
Secretarial							
1.00	0.00	1.00	Director's Secretary	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
0.93	0.00	0.93	Centralized School-Based	0.93	0.00	0.93	0.00
Para Educators							
8.50	7.00	15.50	Hurlbutt Elementary School	10.50	5.00	15.50	0.00
6.79	3.00	9.79	Weston Intermediate School	5.79	3.00	8.79	-1.00
8.34	0.00	8.34	Weston Middle School	7.59	0.00	7.59	-0.75
8.00	1.00	9.00	Weston High School	8.00	1.00	9.00	0.00
Other Classified Staff							
0.60	0.00	0.60	Vocational Specialist	0.60	0.00	0.60	0.00
34.16	11.00	45.16		34.41	9.00	43.41	-1.75
71.31	12.50	83.81		74.56	9.50	84.06	0.25