

Belmont Public Schools

FY 2015 Budget Request

February 12, 2014

“With a commitment to teaching and learning, the Belmont Public Schools strive to nurture the knowledge, skills, and emotional development of each student in order to create a community of engaged learners who contribute to the common good and are of service to others.” This statement of mission, while sincere and accurate, hardly distinguishes the Belmont Public School System from other public school districts: Most high-performing districts share this mission. What does distinguish one district from another is the level of student achievement, the degree of local resources devoted to the public schools, the broad nature of the student population, and the character and quality of the professionals delivering instruction and services.

The Belmont Public School District has attained Level 1 status, based upon overall performance of students on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Less than five percent of the comprehensive school districts (kindergarten through grade 12) in the Commonwealth attain this top level, and to do so the students must demonstrate proficiency against high standards. As well, the district is incorporating the Massachusetts Core Curriculum, a demanding and comprehensive set of academic expectations. Added to the challenge of aligning to the Core is the need to meet increasing numbers of English language learners. The state-mandated requirement for teachers who may have ELL students in the classroom to receive extensive training in Sheltered English Immersion instruction (SEI) places both a significant demand upon the

district's time for training and, consequently, on its financial resources. Virtually every Belmont teacher is likely to have a student who is an English language learner; therefore, every Belmont teacher over the next five years is under a state mandate to receive 45 hours of approved SEI training.

Belmont's achievements are not academic alone. A core belief is that public education is the primary means society has for safeguarding democracy and achieving social justice. The school system has demanding public service requirements. The schools are committed to ensuring diversity among students and cultural sensitivity through its active participation in the METCO program. Because the district is at the forefront of providing services to English language learners, it enjoys a highly respected international reputation as a system that welcomes students from around the world.

The reputation of the schools, the quality of life in the Town, and the proximity of Belmont to the Boston metropolitan area are major factors that explain the district's considerable growth, and particularly the growth of the past two school years. In the fall of 2013 the Belmont School Committee authorized eight study groups to explore the trends in compensation, enrollment, special education, instruction, student life and services, external discretionary revenue, instructional technology, and operations. The work of these groups promises to dovetail with the Long-Range Financial Planning Task Force that the Belmont Select Board enjoined in January 2014. The various reports will be integrated into findings and recommendations of the town-wide task force.

The Enrollment Modeling Group described a trend of enrollment growth that began eight years ago. For the fifteen-year period from school year 1998-99 through the

current school year of 2013-2014, the official kindergarten through grade 12 enrollment in Belmont grew by 599 students, from 3,537 to 4,146, a total enrollment growth of 16.9%. (Note that the data exclude pre-kindergarten enrollments and special education outplacements.) During the first seven years of that span, enrollment was relatively stable, growing only by 46 students, a cumulative 1.3% increase with four years of decreased enrollments and three years of increased enrollments. During the most recent eight school years, the official K-12 enrollment has grown by 553 students, a cumulative growth rate of 15.4%. During this span, there was only one year of declining enrollment. The average annual enrollment growth was 1.9%; thus, the average *annual* rates of growth exceeded the preceding full seven-year rate of 1.3%. The 2013 enrollment projections from New England School Development Council (NESDEC) indicate a continued growth of over 300 students during the next five years through school year 2018-2019 with an additional projected growth of 370 students for the following five years. However, these projections do not take into account major developments such as the Cushing Square project or potential Uplands development. Over the next decade Belmont might well acquire more than 600 new students.

The growth in student enrollment clearly places stress on the Town's resources to support the academic, social, and emotional growth of students, and to do so in adequate facilities and within the class size limits long-set as guidelines by the School Committee. In Fiscal Year 2014 the district had to add 18 positions to address enrollment-related needs across the board—regular education, special education, and teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL). For example, Belmont has seen marked growth in the numbers of students classified as English language learners. Such students, much like

students in special education programs, require additional direct services to support their acquisition of English. Many international families move to towns like Belmont because of the quality of the ESL programs. In school year 2011-2012, Belmont supported 106 English language learners. In 2012-2013 the number increased to 113. In the current school year (2013-2014), the official number is 182, an increase of 72% over the three years. The official number of English language learners is based upon the October 1 school enrollment. In Belmont, as of January 31, 2014, there are actually 187 designated English language learners—the number consistently tends to grow during the school year with new arrivals and students newly identified as ELLs.

If the average per student expenditure in Belmont is \$12,250, then it would not be unreasonable to suggest that every 100 new students have a potential predictable budgetary impact of \$1,250,000. The cost in FY 14 to hire new professionals to meet the enrollment impact exceeded \$500,000. By freezing materials, relying on some available funds from staff turnover, and otherwise seeking savings by controlled expenses, the potential budgetary shortfall for FY 14 is \$217,000; and the school system may need to request this coming spring a reserve funds transfer. The initial budget for FY 15 has sufficient projected revenue to cover the costs of carrying the 18 new positions forward. What it does not provide is resources for reducing class sizes or meeting the expenses of a new growth in student population. The net result is an effective increase in the student-teacher ratio.

The three primary strategic goals remain through FY 15: 1) To prepare all students for college, career, and life-long learning through a balanced and healthy school experience, continuity of curricula aligned with Commonwealth and community

standards, support for educators to experiment and innovate, and clear articulation of instructional models; 2) To support continuous improvement and overall programmatic and fiscal stability by engaging administrators, teachers, students, and community stakeholders in generally accepted practices of long-term strategic planning; 3) To ensure that students receive instruction from consistently highly qualified educators who pursue continuous improvement of their art by hiring well-prepared and diverse professionals, sustaining continuous professional development by means of clear and coherent plans, and implementing a successful educator evaluation system in line with new Commonwealth standards. Seven of the 20 key initiatives to implement the strategy have been completed. The remaining initiatives are well under way. Of particular note is that the three-year strategy extends through FY 15 (School year 2014-2015) and that the new superintendent will have his first year to evaluate needs and priorities and lead in the development of a successor strategy.

We believe that the present budget proposal provides sufficient resources to continue instructional services reasonably comparable to the services provided this current school year (2013-2014). Were more funding to become available, the highest priorities would center upon ways to address the pressures of increased enrollment, especially at the middle school.

Warrant Committee Recommendations from 2013

In the report to the Town about the School Department's FY 14 budget request, the Belmont Warrant Committee provided four broad recommendations for the district: 1) implement changes to constrain long-term salary growth; 2) generate and provide

more detailed information regarding out-of-district placement costs; implement new instructional models and/or staffing strategies to reduce costs; and 4) establish special education stabilization fund procedures.

Implement Changes to Constrain Long-Term Salary Growth

The Warrant Committee noted that the existing step-and-lane salary grid virtually guarantees “that the school budget growth, which has averaged more than 4% annually for the past ten years, will consistently outpace the tax increases sanctioned by Proposition 2 ½.” Salaries and benefits account for two-thirds of the school district expenditures and are, therefore, the single largest cost-drivers within the system. As part of its strategic plan to support continuous improvement by developing a three- to five-year plan that includes fiscal projections of needs and priorities, the School Committee authorized that one of the eight Modeling Groups should analyze compensation trends and offer recommendations for stabilizing growth within, if possible, the 2 ½ annual limit. The report of the Compensation Modeling Group will become public in February 2014. At the same time, the School Committee has begun Interest Based Bargaining with the Belmont Education Association. The Committee has made clear its interests in finding ways to keep compensation competitive, incentive-based, and most of all fiscally predictable and stable. The present salary scales are regionally competitive; and the Committee has high hopes that through working collegially in cooperation and in identification of common interests with the Belmont Education Association there can be reasonable improvements to the compensation system, if not whole scale, at least incremental.

Generate More Detailed Information Regarding Out-of-District Placement Costs

The Warrant Committee has recognized the extent to which the administrative oversight of all expenditures has been limited to the technological shortcomings of the present MUNIS system. The Administration has vowed to continue working closely with the Education Subcommittee of the Warrant Committee to the extent possible and allowable under law. At the beginning of FY 14, the Administration sought a legal opinion to determine the extent to which information about outplacements might be provided to the Subcommittee. Legal counsel to the School Committee determined that all information had to be limited, anonymous, and thoroughly redacted to protect any potential identification of individual client-students. The Administration will continue to work with the Subcommittee to provide as much information as possible and to the extent resources can allow to find ways of providing aggregate service data that the Subcommittee has requested. Access to the kind of detailed, specific, item analysis the Subcommittee would understandably most wish to study simply may not be possible. Special Education, of course, is a mandated program very much constrained under federal and state legislation and regulation. That a year ago the Belmont Special Education program received a very positive state audit does imply that the program is administered both appropriately as well as efficiently. Under law and rule, the cost-effectiveness of any special education program, and especially of special education outplacements, may not be the primary consideration in determining services.

Implement New Instructional Models and/or Staffing Strategies to Reduce Costs

The Warrant Committee has suggested that one potential way to institute savings and reduce compensation costs might be a greater use of less expensive classroom aides in lieu of more expensive licensed professionals. The School Committee has an obligation under state law to ensure that all students receive instruction from fully licensed professionals. While some classroom aides are, indeed, licensed teachers, and while the district consistently seeks to hire highly competent and, when possible, licensed personnel to serve as aides, classroom aides and special educational instructional aides may not, indeed must not, supplant regular classroom instructors. Placing in classrooms professionally trained instructors who are responsible for and trained in the approved curricula is essential. As well, were the district to explore placing aides in charge of classrooms or cohorts, both general state funding and the special entitlement grant funding might be seriously jeopardized when, in all likelihood, state auditors would cite the practice as a violation of regulations that forbid supplanting rather than supplementing. Collective bargaining agreements that also prohibit such practices would further complicate the use of classroom aides in lieu of designated classroom teachers.

Another recommendation from the Warrant Committee suggested that modifying instructional models might provide cost-effective responses to growing enrollments. The central concern for the Administration has been to find ways of managing class sizes, especially at the middle school; and in FY 14 the Department did reorganize the sixth and seventh grade schedules to gain reductions in class size. There was some considerable complaint from parents about the sacrifice of the foreign language introduction program and the gain in the numbers of students in the specialist classes (fine arts and physical

education). The Department will be continuing to seek ways of managing class size, especially for core content areas; however, frankly, the primary concern will be efficient use of space and personnel. Cost will remain a secondary if real concern.

Finally, the Administration regards the importation of technology by such means as iPads, SmartBoards, and the like less likely to foster immediate cost-savings. Rather, the introduction of technological learning tools is a responsible reaction to the need to provide Belmont students the same degree of 21st century skills as other high-performing districts provide their students. There is certainly promise in use of web-based content, but there is also a distinct need to provide professional instruction to students on the ways to manage web-based information, MOOCs, and other electronic content. These innovations, while always constructed with concern for cost, are primarily and foremost instructional priorities rather than budgetary ones.

Establish Special Education Stabilization Fund Procedures

The School Committee adopted a Statement of Protocols for the request of funds from the Special Education Stabilization Fund on March 25, 2013. The Committee believes the document honors the requirements of law and the spirit of the additional requests the Warrant Committee submitted in the summer of 2013. After discussions in the summer of 2013 among School Committee members, Warrant Committee members, members of the Select Board, and the School Administration, we believe the March document is the governing document for accessing the funds.

I wish to close this letter of submission by voicing formally my appreciation for the opportunity to work collegially and in mutual good faith with all Town leaders. I had not previously experienced the broad-based and democratic engagement that constitutes the Town form of governance, and the experience has been an enlightening and rewarding addition to my own civic education. To have been able to serve as the Interim Superintendent for the Belmont Public Schools these three years has been a privilege. I have come to know and respect the commitments and interests of Town officials and their unarguable devotion to the well-being and education of the young.

Yours sincerely,

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Interim Superintendent of Schools