

2015-2016 Scarsdale Budget Q's & A's from the Community

Instructional & Program Questions

Q: *Will Scarsdale be offering Middle School Mandarin 2015-2016?*

A: To begin, let's review High School data:

For background, we have been offering Mandarin at the High School since 2011-12, so we are currently in our fourth year. Here is the enrollment information for the 2014-2015 school year:

Mandarin 313, section 1: 13 students. There are no native or heritage speakers.

Mandarin 313, section 2: 14 students. There are two heritage speakers.

Mandarin 323, (one section): 11 students. There are two heritage speakers.

Mandarin 334, (one section): 10 students.

Mandarin 343/344, (one section): 11 students. One student is a heritage speaker.

Mandarin 355, (one section): 9 students. In this first-time AT Mandarin course, there are two native speakers and two heritage speakers.

Grand totals: Of the 68 students, there are seven heritage speakers and two native speakers.

The enrollment of first-year Mandarin students is as follows:

2011-2012, 50 students (open to all students in grades 9-12) [2%/14%**]

2012-2013, 18 students [5%*, 11%**]

2013-2014, 16 students [6.25%*, 18%**]

2014-2015, 27 students [pending]

* Drop rate during the course.

** Discontinue rate at the end of the year (does not include graduates).

As you can see, our Mandarin students currently make up less than 5% of students enrolled in a World Language. This compares to 59.5% in Spanish, 21.6% in French, and 2.6% in Latin.

Current Middle School Practices:

The Middle School offers students a choice of Spanish or French. Once students choose a language in grade six, they study that language for all three years. At the sixth grade level, World Language classes are taught one period **every other day**, alternating with reading. In grades 7 and 8, World Language classes are taught one period **each day**. Each of the four Middle School houses have three sections of Spanish and one section of French.

When students enter the High School, they have several choices:

- Students may choose to continue with the language they were studying at the Middle School at either Level 2, Level 2 Honors, or Level 3;
- Students may choose a different language to study: French, Spanish, Latin, or Mandarin; or
- Students may choose to study two languages; either two different languages from the one they studied at Middle School, or continue with the same language and add a new one.

Moving forward: We have a plan to consider the addition of Mandarin to the Middle School curriculum in 2016-2017 that includes the following:

- We will review current World Language offerings, the Middle School schedule, and staffing requirements.
- We will survey students and parents for interest, clearly conveying that:
 - A minimum of 60 students per grade is needed to offer Mandarin at the Middle School in order to staff and schedule effectively.
 - Students must continue the study of the chosen World Language for all three Middle School years.
 - World Language classes will not be leveled to accommodate incoming students with prior learning in a particular language.
- We will set a timeline to gather and analyze data.
- We will meet with principals, department chairs, teachers and other administrators to gather further feedback and weigh options.

This comprehensive and collaborative process is necessary for proper implementation, and thus precludes implementation of Mandarin for the 2015-2016 school year.

Q: What is the rationale for the proposed addition of elementary Reading Teachers and elimination of Spanish in first grade?

A: For the past several years the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and the Elementary Principals have been discussing how to support primary students (Grades K and 1) in their literacy development in both reading and writing. The following issues were identified:

- **Time** for literacy instruction during a comparatively short elementary teaching day.
- **Consistent approach** in literacy implementation across all grades and schools.
- **Professional Development** needs of teachers in specific strategies to help all readers grow and develop, particularly nonclassified struggling readers.

- **Reading Teachers** will be added to support general education students in reading and writing, especially in the early grades Kindergarten and 1st.

Proposal: The focus of this proposal is not to address a deficit, but to make sure students are gaining the strong fundamental skills that will allow them to engage in what is a very rigorous Scarsdale curriculum. It is imperative that students receive support early on to help maximize their potential later.

Time: Provide more time for literacy learning in grade 1 by phasing out Spanish in Grade 1 in 2015-2016:

- Grade 1 will gain an additional 80 minutes of literacy instruction.
- Current first graders would continue Spanish in Grade 2 in 2015-2016.
- Spanish would start in grade 2 thereafter.

Consistent Approach and Professional Development:

- Provide professional development in literacy instruction for teachers that is consistent across the five schools (Teachers College Reading and Writing Project).
- Restore the ELA Helping Teacher position to support teachers in literacy, to coordinate a consistent K-5 Literacy Program, and to create and lead data teams to analyze student achievement data.

Reading Teachers:

- The addition of reading teachers in each elementary school will support students in reading and writing.
- Reading teachers will provide additional time for Learning Resource Center teachers to serve classified students, who require ongoing intensive support in reading and other areas.

Q: About what percentage of nonclassified K-3 elementary students do you anticipate will require extra support in order to achieve faster progression in reading?

A: The proposal to add reading teachers will address students who show early signs of difficulty. The goal of early intervention is to lessen the need for support as students reach the later elementary grades. It is reasonable to estimate that in any given year 6-10% of students, or one to two students per section in the primary grades, would benefit from the extra support of a reading teacher. It is important to understand that this is not a remediation of students with extreme difficulties, but an effort to maximize fundamental literacy development for students who may find the acquisition of reading skills more challenging. At the same time reading teachers will extend the learning for all students.

Q: Can you explain the proposed change in reading support, along with the new state-mandated Response to Intervention (RTI) program, in the context of Scarsdale's overall approach to the development of our youngest learners? For example, is the balance of direct instruction versus hands-on, experiential, inquiry-based learning now shifting?

A: Literacy learning has been and continues to be the centerpiece of elementary education in Scarsdale. Without the ability to read well, students are challenged to absorb our deep, rich Scarsdale curriculum. We continue our firm commitment to support all of the unique programs that make Scarsdale...Scarsdale.

Our developmental approach in educating our youngest learners is unwavering. At the same time this budget proposal provides more targeted support for learners in the early grades, a need that has gone unmet for the past six budget years.

Since 2008, the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and the Elementary Principals have requested an increase in Learning Resource Center (LRC) teachers to support nonclassified struggling readers.

- The first priority of LRC teachers is to support the needs of classified students as identified on their IEPs.
- As a second priority, LRC teachers support students in grades 4 and 5 who are not classified, but did not score proficient on state tests and qualify for "local effort".
- As a third priority, depending on LRC teacher availability (which varies by school), support is given to struggling students in grades K-3.
- LRC teachers do not have adequate time to meet the needs of all.

These requests preceded the State raising the cut scores on NYS tests; the focus all along has been on strengthening student literacy learning by front-loading targeted intervention to struggling students in the earliest grades in order to address reading issues sooner rather than later, when such issues may be more difficult to resolve. Research shows that direct reading instruction by a skilled reading teacher gets results in students learning the fundamentals that are so important, such as phonics.

Due to the recent recession and related school budget concerns, additional LRC staffing was not provided, and was not even included in the superintendent's proposed budget requests.

Response to Intervention (RTI), now a state mandate, formalizes a process that had been in place in Scarsdale for many years. While our RTI implementation has been widely discussed and publicized, it does not signal a shift in direction in our educational philosophy.

Q: Why is elementary Spanish instruction (FLES) set to begin now in second grade rather than first grade, as there was a study presented to the BOE that showed that FLES was working for upper grades?

A: Delaying the start of Spanish instruction until second grade is a difficult decision, but given the short elementary day, it is a way to provide more time for literacy instruction in first grade while still preserving the FLES program as a whole.

Q: What is included in the proposed staff development budget?

A: There are several categories:

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Program Improvement | \$389,099 |
| Arts and Aesthetic Education | \$84,633 |
| Interdependence Institute | \$26,936 |
| Scarsdale Teachers Institute | \$297,340 |
| Center for Innovation | \$50,000 |
| Sustainability Initiative | \$50,000 |
| Curriculum Research/Assessment | \$50,600 |

Professional Development \$275,410

- Teacher Grants \$125,410
 - This allocation, which is distributed through small grants to individual teachers, was negotiated through the STA/BOE collective bargaining process.
- Enhancing Instruction \$150,000
 - The \$87,000 increase in this line will fund staff developers from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project to provide a consistent approach to literacy instruction in all five elementary schools.

Q: About what percentage of the increase in the staff development budget represents real growth in opportunities for professional development, as opposed to increases in salary related costs? Is professional development in all categories keeping pace with teacher demand?

A: Three categories represent real growth:

- Enhancing Instruction. The \$87,000 increase in this line will fund staff developers from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project to provide a consistent approach to literacy instruction in all five elementary schools. This represents a non-salary related increase.
- Program Improvement. The \$35,000 increase represents \$8,000 in salary-related costs (per diem summer work costs) and \$27,000 in expanded opportunities for summer days (75 additional days teachers work on curriculum revisions, K-12). This represents real growth of approximately 10%.
- STI (Scarsdale Teachers Institute). The \$26,000 increase is contractually-based on the collective bargaining process. This represents a 9.5% growth over last year.

Q: In order for the broader community to fully understand the available choices and what is at stake for our schools in this budget process, have you identified any educational needs that are not being addressed in this proposal? Have recently identified needs changed, or is addressing them being deferred? (In the last two budget cycles, the Administration expressed a need for various enhancements that did not end up in the school budget, such as, for example, restored Middle School library staffing, Middle School Mandarin instruction, and a High School Computer teacher and Robotics teacher.) Also, do shifts in staffing in the proposed budget require any compromises to the quality of existing programs and/or services that the community should understand in order make informed choices this budget season?

A: As was mentioned in the Superintendent's letter prefacing this year's budget, the approach that was utilized this year was to meet with District-wide leadership to determine needs based on current work, goals and initiatives. School administration feels that we have adequately addressed all major needs and succeeded in enhancing instructional and other programming. There are certainly other considerations which are not represented in this budget, but there was a deliberate attempt to focus our work with targeted outcomes and strategies, and we will continue to prioritize our needs each year to reflect emerging and evolving needs of our students, families, and schools.

After six years of budget retrenchment, we are fortunate this year to strike a comfortable balance between our resources and needs, while preserving and extending the educational programs we value. We believe the quality of proposal represented in this budget will only continue to move our District forward on its current positive trajectory.

Financial & Other Staffing Questions

Q: From the Bond process last year the community got a clearer idea about how we have invested, or not invested, in our buildings, and what we need to do going forward. In order for the community to gain a similar understanding of our investment in the area of educational programs/services and professional development, can you tell us what this proposed budget does in terms of new educational programs or services, as well as real growth in opportunities for professional development (as opposed to salary related cost growth)? And would it be possible to gain some historical perspective from seeing the growth in our investment in these areas over time – including before and after the Recession?

A: The first question is addressed in several of the questions above. In terms of the second question, professional development in Scarsdale is complex and multifaceted. In terms of direct impact on District initiatives, we have identified the following four areas on which to focus to evaluate growth in our investment: summer curriculum improvement, Center for Innovation, Interdependence Institute, and other professional development. It should be noted that the budget document contains other areas of development as well; however, the categories identified here are most representative of District priorities.

PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT BUDGET HISTORY 2005-06 TO 2015-16
Summer Curriculum Work, Center for Innovation, Interdependence institute and Other Professional Development for Teachers

| <u>Budget Year</u> | <u>Expense</u> | <u>Increase/(Decrease)</u> | <u>%Increase/(Decrease)</u> |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>(Pre-recession)</i> | | | |
| 2005-06 | \$220,000 | -- | -- |
| 2006-07 | 238,000 | \$18,000 | 8.18% |
| 2007-08 | 377,300 | 139,300 | 58.53% |
| 2008-09 | 512,230 | 134,930 | 35.76% |
| ----- | | | |
| <i>(Post-recession)</i> | | | |
| 2009-10 | 471,270 | (40,960) | (8.00%) |
| 2010-11 | 486,222 | 14,952 | 3.17% |
| 2011-12 | 515,774 | 29,552 | 6.08% |
| 2012-13 | 648,241 | 132,467 | 25.68% |
| 2013-14 | 597,534 | (50,707) | (7.82%) |
| 2014-15 | 618,941 | 21,407 | 3.58% |
| 2015-16 | 741,445 | 122,504 | 19.79% |

What this chart demonstrates is that efforts in 2007-2009 to provide additional funding in teacher development were derailed by the Great Recession. Spending in the five years following 2008 show relatively small increases and, in fact, two years of decreases. (Exception: in 2012-13, the double digit spike is attributed to the development and funding of the *Center for Innovation* with a price tag of \$100,000.) The proposed 2015-2016 budget is the first material increase other than 2012-2013 that represents an investment in human capital and development. As many who follow District progress know, there have been several significant curricular and programmatic initiatives that require intensive training for teachers and other staff members. Some of these include the following: Singapore Math, global connections and World Languages, balanced literacy, and technology and STE[A]M.

This budget recognizes that continued progress is predicated on the investment we put into our teachers to ensure consistency and alignment between practice and our evolving District goals.

Q: Does the fact of the current budget proposal falling nearly \$400K below the tax cap have implications for future budgets that, perhaps, will make it more challenging to invest in new educational programs and/or services?

A: Many people would say that you shouldn't tax your citizens if you don't need the money to support your programs. Others would say that any district budgeting below the Tax Cap is a missed opportunity to build the budget base for the future.

With the exception of the second budget in 2013 (subsequent to the defeat of the first) the District has not budgeted "to the cap." We have operated by identifying the program needs, and asked the community to support appropriate funding. The issue of building the tax base has not been presented as a goal; however, it is certainly something to consider strategically.

Previous Boards of Education have been clear about not wishing to budget "to the cap," and it seems to the administration that this argument cuts both ways. If it's not acceptable to eliminate programs to get to the tax cap, then why would you tax up to the tax cap, even if it's unnecessary? With one notable exception, this community has a long history of supporting its schools and the budget. At some point we may need to budget above the tax cap and we have felt it is easier to sell that if you can also argue that you have budgeted below the cap in the years it was not needed.

Q: Understanding that current budget assumptions are a snapshot and could change materially, could you nonetheless provide us with historical perspective on this year's projected numbers,

and on this year's large unplanned budget surplus in particular? For example, can you tell us the last year the District began the budget season in a comparable financial position?

A: Historically, this year is not unusual. The current year projection has provided approximately \$2.6MM more in surplus than was originally included in the 2014-15 budget. This has arisen because of a significantly larger than anticipated teacher retirement savings, as well as changes in pension estimates. Looking back at the last six years, we see that we ended the 2013-14 with a surplus of \$2.2MM more than planned, while we ended the 2012-13 year with a surplus of only \$60,000 more than planned. The previous five years 2007-08 thru 2011-12 all ended the year with between \$3.1MM and \$3.7MM more than planned, primarily because of positive claims experience with the District's self-insured health plan, which is difficult to predict accurately, and unanticipated turnover savings from retirements..

Q: At the 1/12 Board Work Session there was some reflection regarding past decisions to take on greater financial risk by reducing various budget reserves in order to limit tax levy growth. It was then noted, "We've been lucky." How would you characterize this proposed budget in terms of tolerance of financial risk? And what key examples illustrate this?

A: The 2015-16 budget makes strategic adjustments which address every one of the specific financial risks that were detailed in the Moody's rating warning issued in May 2014 and received just days after the approval of the 2014-15 budget. We will be issuing bonds in the next several years, meaning that we would like to reflect as little financial risk as possible. The structural budget changes of reducing the fund balance appropriation for future budgets ("prior year surplus") from as high of \$6.8MM in 2011-12 to \$3.8MM in 2014/15 to \$500,000 in 2015-16 is a prime example of reducing financial risk. This, coupled with the re-establishment of the health care reserve and the elimination of a budgeted operating surplus, makes the 2015-16 budget the first that will be structurally balanced in many years. These steps will very likely remove the negative outlook from Moody's.

Q: As you crafted this proposed budget, what metrics did you use – and do you normally use -- to determine the community's financial health?

A: We use several different metrics to assess the community's financial health. First, we review *Median Household Income* (\$208,750, 2010) and *Per Capita Income* (\$100,428, 2010) statistical trends, placing Scarsdale at the top of Westchester County (*MHI*, \$79,585, 2010; *PCI*, \$47,204, 2010). Another metric is the STAR (School Tax Relief) data, which tells us that approximately 55% of District residents earn below \$500,000, while 45% earn more than \$500,000. We also

analyze the real property tax-base growth factor, which is the increase in value of real property in the community during a specific time period. Over the last three years, the average growth in real property value has been 1.2% each year.

Q: There is a reduction in physical education. .8 Secretary/.1 PE. Fox Meadow largest of the schools. Can you explain this?

A: The reduction in physical education staff at Fox Meadow is directly attributable to the reduction in the number of class sections in the building. No students will receive less instruction in PE as a result of this reduction.

There have been several cuts to administrative staff positions in recent budgets, and more are proposed in this budget. None of them are palatable, and may have an impact on our ability to deliver services down the road. The part-time secretarial position at Fox Meadow, however, will not end up being a significant reduction. I believe the intention is to provide additional office assistance for the school using a part-time aide, so the actual reduction in staff time will be more insignificant than it appears.

Q: Village Finance hearings have included \$50k for a comfort station at the tennis courts. Hope you will put it in.

A: The Assistant Superintendent for Business has discussed this item with the Village administration and supports the plan as it was recently proposed by them. The Village will manage the construction and provide the cleaning and maintenance of the facility. It would provide a cost-effective benefit to both Middle School students who take gym on the courts or the field, as the lower entrance to the building is locked during the day, and to the community at large, who uses the courts after school and on weekends. The proposal, however, will be to use funds from this year's budget surplus to pay for the construction, rather than request a budget appropriation for 2015-16. The question is still under deliberation.

Q: Why are we not adding 22,500 to the amount to the Teen Center to match the original amount?

A: The funding for the Teen Center is proposed at the same level as last year.

Q : Looking through Westchester Putnam SBA, our reserves very low in comparison. Can you explain why?

A: It's not surprising to hear that other districts have higher reserves than we do. In particular, other districts have a much higher need for tax certiorari reserves. Scarsdale's tax roll is mostly composed of residential properties. These tend to produce fewer tax challenges than commercial properties. Districts with large amounts of commercial property within their borders will need larger tax certiorari reserves; these may be as much as 10% of a district's budget. Although we do not base our reserves on what other districts are doing, by comparison, Scarsdale's tax certiorari reserve is projected to be approximately 2.4% of the budget at the end of the year.

The District has an additional risk factor that other districts don't have, however, and that may affect its financial health: the self-insured health plan. Although the plan has literally saved millions of taxpayer dollars since inception, its potential volatility dictates the need for a reserve. Such a reserve was maintained until June 30, 2014, when it was depleted after having been found to be out of compliance with recent interpretations of state law. Scarsdale's health care reserve was recently reauthorized, but at the moment, is not funded. This financial plan proposes funding it at a \$2.25MM level as of June 30, 2015 as a guard against future plan deficits. At that level, the health insurance reserve represents only 1.5% of its budget.