



Office of the Superintendent

Unlocking the Potential in ALL Students

Dr. Alberto Vázquez Matos, Acting Superintendent

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www.middletownschools.org

April 18, 2022

Dear Mayor Florsheim,

It is in the spirit of nurturing trust, within our district and with the community, that we have decided to respond to each of the inaccurate statements that are in your budget address. This exercise was time consuming and could have been avoided if, at the joint budget workshop on March 29th or in any meeting before or after that workshop, you had chosen to engage in dialogue and ask for clarification on these points. The Board and district administrators would have been, and still are, more than willing to provide additional information or clarifying answers to your queries.

When the Board and Common Council reconvene tonight, we look forward to engaging in a public discourse around our proposed budget. We anticipate that you will be in attendance and will take part in the dialogue then.

Sincerely,

Dr. Alberto Vázquez Matos
Acting Superintendent of Schools

Deborah V. Cain
Chairwoman, Middletown Board of Education



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The italicized statements are extractions from your Budget Address delivered on April 1, 2022. We've labeled the statements in [this copy of the address](#) for ease in finding them. Our responses are in blue.

- A. *Overall, the Board's budget proposal is for a 6% or \$5.5 million increase over last year's budget for operational costs, plus an additional \$3.6 million proposed budget for capital projects and facilities maintenance. This is a large increase in comparison with recent budget years, but I'll get more into my concerns with cost later. First, I want to discuss substance, because costs can be justified when the substance is there—that's what budgeting is all about.*

Over \$3 million of this budget's increase relates to [contractual](#) salary and wage increases, in addition to associated employee benefit costs for existing staff. This amount allows the school district to maintain its current staffing in accordance with the district's contractual obligations. To say that "substance" does not exist is to suggest that the livelihoods of our teachers, paraprofessionals, and all our support staff do not matter. We do not subscribe to this premise. To that end, we ratified contracts for the Middletown Federation of Teachers (MFT) and Middletown Federation of Paraprofessionals (MFP) unions this academic year; these contract ratifications provide raises for our employees' tireless work in service of our students and families.

- B. *At the joint budget workshop between the Board of Education and the Common Council earlier this week, administration officials stated that the need for a 6% increase stems in large part from the district's struggles to attract and retain qualified teachers and other school staff.*

This is inaccurate. At the joint meeting the Board clearly stated that the 6% increase stems largely from contractual obligations (see above). This is also documented in the [budget presentation](#) and in the relevant [contracts](#). The Board has consistently stated that in order to attract and retain high quality candidates, we must offer competitive salaries. With some districts offering teachers signing bonuses, some as high as \$3,000 ([Hartford Public Schools](#)), and other districts developing programs to assist teachers with down payments on homes ([New London Public Schools](#)), the education market is even more competitive than it typically is. Certainly, the [3.3 million dollar salary, wage, and benefit increase](#) permits us to stay competitive in retaining current employees and in recruiting new hires.

- C. *... their budget proposal makes virtually no new investment in existing school staff, and in some cases, it actually makes cuts.*

This statement is patently false. Every component of the Board's proposed budget invests in our employees and our community. Using our strategic operating plan as our guide, we strive to deliver an exceptional educational experience for our students on a daily basis.



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- D. The budget for full-time teacher salaries is reduced in this budget for six out of eight elementary schools, with a 3% increase at Macdonough and less than 1% increase at Wesley. At Beman and MHS, it's a similar story, with budgets for teacher salaries going slightly up in some departments and slightly down in others.*

This statement is misleading. The Board is not proposing to reduce teachers' salaries. When a teacher retires or resigns, it is rare to replace the teacher with another who has an equal number of years of experience and/or credentials. Rather, in practice, a newer teacher is often hired for the position, which more often than not equates to a lower salary step. To the extent that there is any decrease, it reflects this convention. Every single one of our returning teachers is getting a salary increase. Overall, salaries for certified staff will increase by 2.9%.

- E. If teacher salaries are truly a problem for retention in Middletown, this budget does nothing to solve that problem. It also seems that the Board's practice of hiring staff using one-time grants and warning new hires that their salaries are not in the budget, which is extremely poor accounting practice, might itself be a contributor to staff retention problems.*

As noted above, and unfortunately bears repeating, these statements are misleading and inaccurate. The proposed 2022-23 budget increases teachers' salaries.

A grant is an investment in positive change, usually in response to an identified need, within a specified timeframe. Positions are advertised as grant-funded with an end date to alert prospective applicants and new hires to the time-limited nature of the position. A cursory review would demonstrate that this is standard practice. To say that this is "extremely poor accounting practice" reflects an incomplete understanding of the fiscally responsible use of grants within both private and public educational institutions.

- F. An 18% reduction is proposed for substitute teacher salaries, and the line item for additional compensation for teachers who take on extra duties being slashed 75%, further intensifying the budgetary and operational pressures bearing down on teachers and classroom staff.*

This statement is misleading. In order to meet the needs of our school communities, we have decreased the number of daily substitute teachers and increased the number of building substitute teachers. This practice is not only good for our schools, as it provides administrators with a reliably available staff person to fill in for daily absences, but it is also good for students. A building substitute is part of the school community; this allows for opportunities for meaningful relationships to develop and connections to be made. To that end, the line for Building Subs (51316) increased by \$187,530 or 37%.

With regard to the statement "additional compensation for teachers who take on extra duties being slashed 75%", we have to assume that you are looking at object code 51510 "Additional



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Compensation to Teachers"; this line decreased by \$35,000 or 75%. For the past two school years (2020-21 and 2021-22), we have had a \$0.00 expenditure in that line. Therefore, in response to the historical expenditure trends and in an effort to be good financial stewards, we have budgeted \$0.00 for the 2022-23 school year.

- G. Cuts to purchased services hit teaching and learning staff again: professional development and employee training, previously budgeted at \$8,085, is slashed 64% to less than \$3,000.*

This statement is false. The reduction in professional development (object code 53200) is a reduction in the professional development line for the Board of Education members, not for teachers nor employees. The staff training (line 53205) in the Personnel Services budget (e.g., sexual harassment prevention training) was not cut, but simply moved to line 55010.

- H. The routine overtime line for snow day custodial coverage and snow removal is zeroed out.*

This statement is misleading. These line items were zeroed out, so that all overtime costs are within the same object code 51118 Classified Overtime (see page 108 of [the proposed budget](#)). Refinement of budget coding drives accuracy in reporting.

- I. With two law firms billing dozens of attorney hours to interview the dozens of witnesses who came forward, that investigation will indeed be costly, but the cost of the investigation is not reflected anywhere in this proposal, so we don't know how costly.*

Your reference to a 2021-22 investigation's cost while responding to the Board's 2022-23 proposed budget is confounding. We certainly expect that this investigation will be over before the start of the coming fiscal year, an expectation that we have shared with you and your legal team. Because the pending investigation is expected to conclude in this school year, we have not budgeted for similar legal fees in the 2022-23 school year. On the subject of transparency around cost, the Board regularly responds to requests for information under FOIA, including those related to expenditures. On March 6, 2022, Cassandra Day published an article in the Middletown Press titled "[After schools chief resigns, what's next for Middletown?](#)" In that article, the following was stated:

The investigation remains ongoing, Lavorgna said. As of Jan. 31, the district has paid Thompson Hine \$226,981.59 for its services, Lavorgna said.

As we have shared with you directly, and with the public, the Board has received limited information about the investigation so as not to interfere with the investigation. Therefore, we have responded to all requests to the extent we have been able to, and that "the investigation remains ongoing".



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With regard to the legal fees, we are more than willing to provide an update. To date, Middletown Public Schools has paid \$342,029.65 to Thompson and Hine, the law firm conducting the investigation, and \$87,332.50 to Shipman and Goodwin, the Board's legal counsel which has continued to advise the Board about legal issues as they may arise during the school year, including with respect to the pending investigation.

- J. The lack of transparency, in this budget and on the whole, around the status of this investigation and its cost to the public represents my second major concern.*

While the pending investigation has nothing to do with the proposed budget, your claim about the lack of transparency is unfounded, as you are aware that the investigation relates to confidential personnel matters.

With regard to the budget, the Board held its annual budget workshop on March 21, 2022 and its annual joint budget workshop with the Common Council on March 29, 2022; both meetings were open to the public and streamed on YouTube. Printed copies of the proposed budget were available for all members of the Board and Common Council, as well as an electronic version for the public. The recordings of these meetings, the slides shown within the meetings, and the proposed budget book have been and will remain [available on our website](#). We have nothing to hide and are more than willing to discuss both current and proposed costs.

- K. Looking at staffing, we see a fairly substantial increase of \$834,000, or 19%, for classroom paraprofessional salaries (although library paras are reduced by 50%).*

As noted above, approximately 70% of this total increase is due to [contractual](#) salary and wage increases for existing staff. The number of paraprofessionals that a school district employs is determined by the number of individualized education plans (IEPs) that call for a student to have the one to one support of a paraprofessional. Therefore, any increase in the number of paraprofessional positions is directly related to the district's compliance with its statutory obligations, and with the sole purpose of serving our identified student needs.

The 50% reduction (i.e., we had two and we now propose one) in library paraprofessionals is accurate. In order to provide equitable services to our students across the district, we have budgeted for a library media specialist, a certified professional, for Beman Middle School, in the 2022-23 school year, thus reducing the library paraprofessional position by one.

- L. But strangely, this follows a \$530,000 decrease in the same salary line in last year's budget. Administration officials acknowledged that the line had been underfunded in the previous budget and had to be replenished to meet classroom needs, but could not explain why. This presents a third major concern in and of itself: it should not be possible for a professional finance operation, especially one operating with public dollars, to lose more than half a million dollars without*



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explanation, and no single official should have the authority to move that much money without checks and balances in place to ensure accountability.

Your suggestion that the Board lost half a million dollars or that a single official moved money without checks and balances is a distortion of the known facts. \$530,000 was transferred from the paraprofessional line *this* fiscal year (the 2021-22 school year) into a line designated for the repairs and/or upgrade to the MHS track. Due to the current competitive market for educational positions, we were unable to fill a number of paraprofessional positions this year, leaving us with an overage in that line.

On February 7, 2022, Ms. Cheryl Walcott went before the Board of Education's Budget Committee with the initial proposal to move the \$530,000 from the paraprofessional salary line to the line designated for the refurbishment of the MHS track that is in poor condition. Then, on February 8, 2022, Ms. Walcott went before the Board of Education proposing the same transfer. The Board approved this budget transfer. This was done publicly, is on record, and was done through a system of checks and balances just as every other budget transfer is done.

M. The big salary jump that raises the most serious questions is the \$420,000 increase to three budget lines for employee stipends and payments to non-contracted employees, representing a hefty 74% hike from last year. At the budget workshop, the administration indicated that salaries for newly-created administrative positions are being partially paid for with one-time grant dollars. This appears to be the line where those dollars are housed, with some of the new positions in question budgeted elsewhere at less than half their contractual salary.

Assuming that you are referring to lines 51721, 51901, and 51121, here is the explanation:

Line 51721: This increase is directly linked to additional opportunities for teachers to earn compensation. These are not salaries. Rather, they are contractually determined stipends for teachers who are hired to be sports coaches, club advisors, etc. This was a result of contract negotiations with the MFT union ratified on February 18, 2022.

Line 51901: This increase is due to higher than anticipated enrollment in our Swaim's String Program, thus additional staff are needed to serve the increased number of students enrolled, and as a consequence, there is a commensurate increase in total wages for instructors.

Line 51121: This increase is a placeholder to accommodate the anticipated increase in the AFSCME 466 contract which will take effect in the 2022-23 school year. As with all renegotiations, a new contract will cost money; this line item will pay for those anticipated costs.

Therefore, this "hike" allows the Board to provide its employees with appropriate compensation, our students with opportunities that create a robust educational experience, and to be fiscally prepared for upcoming negotiations.



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N. ... the budget proposed by the Board relies heavily on one-time state and federal grants to paper over the fact that the administration has created and hired for multiple new salaried positions, several earning six figures, without budgeting for them and without a plan to do so.

On March 28, 2022, the United States Education Secretary, [Dr. Miguel Cardona](#) released a [statement](#) in which he called on states, districts, and higher education institutions to use their ARP funds for salaries. Prior to this statement, the U.S. Department of Education made it abundantly clear that ARP funds may be used for salaries. Therefore, we are well within the federal government's guidelines to add positions to the ARP ESSER grant budget in support of the recovery and acceleration of students as we exit the pandemic.

We have intentionally added three key positions in the 2021-22 school year: Coordinator for Extended Learning (funded through the Alliance Grant); Director of Communications (funded through ARP ESSER) and Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (funded through ARP ESSER). The two director positions were created in response to audits (a communication audit and equity audit) that were conducted by external entities for the district. These positions will continue to be partially grant funded through the 2023-24 school year. In preparation for the sunset of the grant, the district will begin shifting these positions through an incremental percentage transfer to the BOE budget in 2022-23 and 2023-24. In the case of the Coordinator position, the district will assess the data from student outcomes and available funds to determine if the position will or will not be extended; the person who holds this position is and has always been made fully aware of this fact.

In addition and always in an effort to be good financial stewards, we have a sustainability plan in place, through which we increasingly take on the salaries of permanent positions that are in these grants. This is a gradual process and its cost is offset by reducing the number of purchased services (i.e. HMH, ICLE, etc.) that we have used in the past as we continue to develop organizational capacity through grant-funded initiatives.

O. This is doubly true because, under state law, once a school budget is adopted it becomes the baseline, or spending floor, for the following year's budget—so even though several new positions are not funded beyond the next couple of years, they will, under law, become fixed costs for the district if they are adopted in the fashion the Board proposes this year.

The law that you're referring to is [Minimum Budget Requirement \(MBR\)](#), which, according to the Connecticut School Finance Project, "prohibits a municipality from budgeting less for education than it did the previous year." MBR does not apply to grant funds. It only applies to the general operating budget. Therefore, the salaries and other costs that are housed within grants are not protected by MBR and, therefore, have no effect on the baseline or spending floor for the following year's budget.



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- P. For all of these reasons and more, there must be full transparency from the Board, beyond broad categories and infographics, on how and where they have spent or plan to spend the federal pandemic assistance they have received, and their plans for specific programs and staff positions that will be affected when the funding is depleted.*

With regard to federal and state grant monies, this is all public information already. Please look here: <https://connecticut.egrantsmanagement.com>.

- Q. Moreover, we also need an explanation of why so many new administrative positions were created in the last two years, at such high rates of pay, while funding for existing and new teacher salaries stagnates or declines.*

Refer back to point N in response to this. Again, teachers' salaries are not stagnating or declining.

- R. The vacuum created by their departure on indefinite paid leave appeared to leave the staff at Central Office, including the acting superintendent, in the essentially impossible position of crafting a budget with no access to the only people who truly understand that budget. The Board itself, too, has lost institutional memory recently with the departure of incumbent members and the addition of several new ones.*

As stated in our opening, this budget is the work of a team of dedicated, competent, and tenacious individuals who assiduously put this budget together. The district has a practice of including entire teams in its work annually, thus cross training our employees and building organizational capacity. To state that a vacuum has been created due to the placement of senior leaders on administrative leave during the investigation is as deeply hurtful as it is dismissive of our team of professionals, who have worked steadfastly on behalf of our students and district.

Additionally, to state that the Board has lost institutional memory by gaining three new members is insulting to the Board, its longstanding administrators, and current team members.

- S. The administration has acknowledged this issue and indicated that steps are being taken to correct it, which is good. However, an independent forensic audit of the Board's recent financial practices is necessary to establish best practices going forward, and I hope that my Council colleagues will join me in urging the Board to take this step.*

Annually, the City of Middletown contracts with independent accounting auditors, to complete a financial audit that includes the Board of Education. A review of the most recent audit reports shows that there are no findings, let alone a recommendation for a forensic audit. Therefore, your call for an "independent forensic audit" has no basis. We are unclear why you have chosen to proceed in this manner, and are deeply disappointed in your approach.