

## Responses to RTM Member Mackenzie

**Q 1. The \$151 million BOE budget for 2013-14 accounts for over 54% of the total \$278 million budget. When you include \$24 million in additional school expenses carried by the town side (e.g. debt service and nurses), total education spending is \$175 million, 63% of the total budget at a cost of \$17,073 per student.**

**Response:** Each town carries various education expenses on the town side of the budget, based on their historical budgeting practices. The total cost of education spending is reported to the State Department of Education which then computes a Per Pupil Expenditure report, so that all towns can use data compared the same way. The official PPE for Fairfield as shown in the Power Point presentation is \$ 14,529 for 2011-12, the last year comparable data is available.

**Q 2. Even though the BOE budget has been contained by the BOS, BOF, and RTM to only 1.6% annual growth over the past five years, we are still impacted by the average increase of 7.1% per year experienced during the ten years from 1999 through 2009.**

**Response:** The Fairfield School District has seen significant growth in the student body during the 1999 to 2009 period, requiring an investment in both operating and capital costs. (See pages 7, 8, and 125 in budget book)

**Q 3. The 2014-15 proposed BOE Budget is up 3.3% (\$5 million) versus the proposed increase in all other town expenses of less than 2% (\$2.5 million). Inflation in 2013 was up only 1.5%.**

**Response:** In the last five years the overall rate of inflation has been 1.76% and the BoE budget has grown only 1.61%. This is less than the average growth rate of contracted services and is well below the official inflation rate for educational services published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is 4.12%.

**Q 4. Many towns in Fairfield County are much wealthier than Fairfield, which is clear when we look at the value of their tax base (real estate and personal property) on a per student basis. For example, Greenwich has \$5.0 million per student, New Canaan \$2.8 million, Darien \$2.6 million, Westport \$2.4 million, and Fairfield \$1.5 million. At less than half their average, we simply can't afford to spend as much as these wealthier towns.**

**Response:** Families moving into our area consider Fairfield along with other Fairfield County towns. The costs of operating within Fairfield County are greater than in other parts of Connecticut. Thus, the Fairfield Schools must compare its operating costs with area surrounding towns, and families, when deciding what town to move to, compare our schools with local towns, not Hartford area towns.

**Q 5. The state developed the "PIC Index" (Public Investment Community Index) to measure the "wealth and need" of each town in Connecticut--the lower the score, the wealthier the town. Fairfield's score is far more comparable to Avon, Guilford, and Farmington than to wealthier Fairfield County towns. For example, the Greenwich PIC Index = 22, New Canaan = 28, Darien = 45, and Westport = 65. Whereas Fairfield = 189, Avon = 182, Guilford = 186, and Farmington = 192.**

**Response:** PIC was developed by the CT OPM to measure the relative wealth and need of CT's towns and is used to determine eligibility for Urban Action Bond Assistance, Community Economic Development programs, Residential Mortgage Guarantee programs, Malpractice Insurance Purchase programs and Enterprise Zone designations, as per CT Web site. It is NOT the standard used by the State of Connecticut Department of Education in determining the level of reimbursement for education expenses, i.e. a town's ability to fund their own education expenses. The State has adopted the official Adjusted Equalized Net Grand List ("AENGLC") ranking for this purpose. AENGLC ranks the 8 DRG A towns from # 1 (Greenwich) to # 17 (Easton); while DRG B towns rank from # 18 (Fairfield) to # 86 (West Hartford). Over the last many years, Fairfield has ranked in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> in "wealth" while our per pupil expenditures have declined from 29<sup>th</sup> to 62<sup>nd</sup> in the state.

**Conclusion:** Whether you use PIC, AENGLC, the Sperling Cost of Living Index or the National Association of Realtors Affordability Index, Fairfield ranks near the top of DRG B indices and just below some DRG A towns (and sometimes slightly higher) in terms of affordability. The real questions – Does it cost more to operate in Fairfield County (DRG A towns) than in the rest of the state – YES! Do parents, when they are looking to move to Fairfield compare us with school systems in Fairfield County, or with towns like Avon and Farmington? - YES! The Fairfield School system must operate within the Fairfield County market and meet expectations of our citizen’s for their children’s education, as well as high expectations of senior citizens and other town residents. People have raised their families in Fairfield for a reason - the quality of town services.

**Q 6. Based on 2013 data, Fairfield’s spending per student is already higher than 14 of the other 18 towns in our socio-economic “peer” group, designated by the state as District Reference Group B (DRG-B). We spend more even though we have more than twice as many students as the average of the other towns and should therefore benefit from the economies of scale. If our spending were just equal to the average for DRG-B, we would save over \$6 million per year.**

**Response:** Yes, our spending per pupil is higher than some DRG B towns, many of which operate in New Haven, Middlesex and Hartford counties. However, it is more appropriate to compare operating costs with Fairfield County schools (mostly in DRG A) because that is the market we operate in.

**Q 7. We should also remember that the quality of a school system is not determined by how much it spends. This conclusion is supported by numerous studies on the subject. As a case in point, there are many towns in DRG-B that spend less than we do yet achieve better test results.**

**Response:** There are many data points to measure the quality of a town’s school system and standardized test results are only one such metric. The State of Connecticut developed an index score as the best measure of overall student performance on CMT across all grades and subjects (20 tests). The index measures 0 to 100. Fairfield is ranked at 90.6, at a cost of \$14,529 per pupil, while the average of DRG A schools is 93.9 at a cost of \$ 17,125 per pupil. While our index score is 3.5% lower than DRG A towns, our PPE is 15.2% lower than DRG A towns.

Test results are not the only quality measure. For example, expenses related to our outstanding music and art programs do not directly translate into test score gains, but are critical to the quality of education.

**Q 8. One of the most important signs of a town’s economic health is its home values, and many local realtors report that prospective home buyers consider Fairfield’s taxes to be too high relative to “competing” towns.**

**Response:** Most local realtors will confirm that the first question asked by families considering a purchase in Fairfield, or any other town, is the quality of a local school system. The thirteen Federal Reserve Banks in the US have conducted studies on the relative impact of the quality of a school system on property values. Each has determined that quality school systems create added value, beyond the additional taxes required to support them, and thus provide a net value to property values.

**Q 9. Under State law, only the Board of Education can decide how the education budget will be allocated. They decide whether savings will be found in academic programs, non-academic programs, or administrative costs.**

**Response:** In the last ten years the BoS, BoF and RTM have reduced the Board of Education budget requests by over \$19.0M. The BoE has adjusted its annual budgets to accommodate those annual reductions, with 44% coming from improved pricing and cost savings on contract bids, pension experience and health insurance savings. 56% has come from operations, with it split equally between administrative cost reductions, capital and maintenance cost reductions and reduced program services. In fact all three areas (academic, non-academic and administrative) have seen cost reductions.

**Q 10.** Prismatic, an independent consulting group, conducted a school audit in 2010 and recommended that we eliminate the “House System” which effectively creates six high schools within our two. Prismatic estimated that, by eliminating redundant administrative staff, we would save \$1.7 million a year.

**Response:** See attached excerpt from ‘Initial Response to the Operational Audit, March 2011’

**Q 11.** 10% of the courses we offer in our high schools have an average class size of only 1-5 students; 15% have 6-10 students; 18% have 11-15 students. The maximum high school class size under BOE guidelines is 35. By consolidating classes and eliminating courses for which demand is minimal, we could save millions of dollars in instructional expense.

**Response:** See page 132 of the budget manual for explanation of classes less than 15. There is not “millions” of savings. Contractual load limits in the FEA contract are well below the BOE guidelines (see pp. 133-136 of budget book).

**Q 12.** Further savings can probably be realized through additional outsourcing of various administrative and support functions (e.g. custodians and payroll).

**Response:** The BoE has implemented an out-sourcing of the food service program as a means of controlling costs and improving quality of services. While it is easy to suggest savings could be achieved by consolidating BoE support services with Town support services, that can only be verified by an actual review of the service requirements of both the Town and the Board of Education. PA 13-60 suggests that the Board of Finance is the best body to review and recommend any savings of this nature.

**Q 13.** As of 2012, 44 Connecticut towns imposed some fee for high school sports, including Darien, Wilton, and Weston. Fairfield’s BOE recently voted to eliminate even the fees imposed on teams that must rent facilities. Some examples of taxpayer costs per student: Boys’ ice hockey = \$2,273, Boys’ swimming = \$2,058, Girls’ ice hockey = \$1,932.

**Response:** Yes, our local Board of Education, like 122 other towns, believes that the quality of a school system is measured by more than participation in academic classes. Parents also consider the quality of extra-curricular activities. Studies have also shown that a student’s participation in extra-curricular activities such as music, art, etc., helps improve their overall academic performance. Thus, as a one year stop gap an additional fee was charged for those sports requiring rental of facilities outside the district. A majority of the Board felt that a two tiered system of charging for some sports and not others was unfair.

**Q 14.** We live in a great town. To keep it that way we have to allocate our taxes wisely and control spending. If we assume that any cuts to the education budget will mean disaster for our children’s future, we will wind up over-taxing the community, driving prospective new home buyers away and losing the broad base of residents that makes for a balanced and dynamic town. Don’t “kick the can down the road”! We were elected to protect Fairfield’s future.

**Response:** All public officials are elected to consider all points of view and strike a balance between competing needs of a town’s residents. Making tough decisions is not “kicking the can down the road,” but rather is answering this question: If the BoE budget is approved at the amount recommended by the Board of Finance at 3.3% growth over last year, the result would be 1.90% annual growth over six years compared to an inflation rate of 1.76%. This also accommodates a growth of 17.5% in student body and an average education inflation rate of 4.76%. That decision is not kicking the can down the road, but IS striking a balance.

## Initial Response to the Operational Audit (Excerpt) March 2011

This recommendation would eliminate the House Plan and replace it with a traditional high school structure. The House Plan has been part of the Fairfield schools since the 1950's. A shift of this magnitude could not be undertaken without a full study of all of the implications.

Implementing this recommendation would have a significant impact on the learning environment and on the schools' ability to maintain the standards of excellence in teaching and student services that our students deserve and our community has come to expect. The Audit contains significant inaccurate information and numerous statements that indicated that the authors did not fully understand the roles and responsibilities of the high schools' staff and administrative teams.

- The Audit Report stated that the content area departments are not represented or organized in the house system. At Fairfield Ward the departments are grouped by house and supervised and supported by the Housemaster.
- Student disciplinary and attendance issues are not initially addressed by the Housemaster; this is one of the responsibilities of the Dean.
- The Audit quoted a survey respondent who stated that funds that support The Battle of the Houses during Homecoming and similar school spirit events could be better used elsewhere. Homecoming, The Battle of the Houses, and other spirit generating events are not funded through the school budget and clearly promote a positive spirit among our students, for their school, and for the Houses to which they belong.
- The Audit reported that the work of the Housemasters was essentially the same as assistant or vice-principals, that their work is primarily monitoring student behavior and determining student discipline. The Housemasters' responsibilities differ greatly from Prismatic's view of the "traditional" assistant principal and are far more comprehensive in Fairfield's two high schools. The Audit Report stated that the Curriculum Leaders and the Deans make it unnecessary for Housemasters to become involved in curriculum implementation and teacher supervision and evaluation. This is inaccurate.
- Housemasters are responsible for coordinating the overall educational program for each student in their Houses. They initiate and guide the collaboration of the House Teams which respond to struggling students. Members of the House Support Teams are the Housemaster, Dean, school counselors, school psychologist, social worker, student assistance counselor, and several teachers. House support teams headed by Housemasters provide early intervention through weekly staffing and SRBI teaming, create proactive behavioral strategies in collaboration with special education, school counseling, and the counseling center, and closely monitor attendance, discipline and student performance for the students in their Houses. Housemasters provide the leadership and instructional supervision needed to develop individualized programs to promote student success.
- Each Housemaster is responsible for the direct supervision and evaluation of over 50 teachers and staff members. This includes multiple formal and informal observations, goal conferences, and all end of year evaluation meetings with individual teachers and staff members. The Housemaster is also the PPT chairperson for each special education student assigned to the House and 8<sup>th</sup> graders transitioning to the high school.
- The day-to-day management of student behavior and attendance in each house is the responsibility of the Deans. They initiate contact with parents regarding student discipline. The Deans also maintain attendance records and disseminate information on

attendance to staff and parents. In the area of student attendance, they chair the Attendance Appeals Board in each House and maintain records of those student appeals hearings. They work closely with the Housemasters and the House Teams to develop plans for individual student success at the high school. Teachers often consult with the Deans to create intervention strategies to guide appropriate student behavior. They work closely with the security staff and with the SRO assigned by the Fairfield Police Department. Deans do not provide teacher supervision or curriculum leadership as reported by Prismatic.

- The Administrator for Guidance and Pupil Services oversees the guidance and counseling services offered and supervises and evaluates all the personnel associated with those programs. He is responsible for all student records, the Program of Studies, CAPT and AP Testing, coordination of the UCONN ECE program, many parent outreach programs and, in collaboration with the Headmaster, and the development of the master schedule.

The House Plan in the high schools of Fairfield supports the important work of teachers in numerous ways. Among the most important responsibilities of the Housemasters is to insure there is high quality instruction taking place in every classroom in their Houses. They establish high performance standards, implementing the Fairfield Plan for Teacher Evaluation, and by maintaining an active and visible presence in the classrooms. Being able to maintain this focus on instruction and student learning without primary responsibility for student behavior and related matters enables the high schools to create and sustain an atmosphere that emphasizes instruction and academic performance above all else. We may not be able to directly tie the consistently steady record of achievement by the students of Fairfield to the House Plan, but there is no refuting the fact that the priority on instruction in the current iteration of the House Plan demonstrates our commitment to sound instruction and student learning and makes a positive difference.