



Stephanie Seguino: Burlington's School Budget Proposal

Dear Neighbors,

I am writing as your Ward 6 School Commissioner regarding the upcoming vote on this year's school budget. I am writing to ask your support for the budget, and would like to explain why. (And I apologize for the long email, but a sound bite won't do this topic justice).

I see the responsibility of the Board as representing the interests and well-being of all of the constituents in our community—students, parents, District staff, the community, and taxpayers. Our code of ethics requires that Board members not pursue an agenda that prioritizes any of these groups over others. I and other Board members take this charge seriously. We recognize that to best serve our community, we cannot afford to ignore any of these groups. I firmly believe we are in this together, and a goal of mine has been to maintain a balanced approach so that we stay connected as a cohesive community, not one splintered and divided. To that end, I voted to support this year's budget and hope that you will, too, on Town Meeting Day.

I would like to respond to some concerns about the spending amount in the budget—to give you a sense of the complexities of budgeting and finances. We made the decision to invest in strategic areas, including resources to help close the achievement gap. One way we managed to contain spending was by cutting \$540,000 from central office. This type of cut is not sustainable, however, because for the district to function well requires the services of central office, including property services and Human Resources. But due to pressures from Montpelier on the education fund, we felt it imperative to limit the tax impact of our budget.

Per equalized pupil spending in the budget will rise from \$14,991 to \$15,111—a 0.8% increase.

One commentator on FPF noted that Burlington spends much more per pupil than do most other states. Burlington is a city with a high poverty rate. As a result, 50 percent of our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, that is, are low income. We do a better job than many states in supporting children across the socio-economic spectrum, making our spending more equitable. Lower spending in other states may in fact reflect failure to invest in supports for children with disabilities, or who are low income or English language learners. Average per pupil spending, in other words, tells us nothing about how those dollars are distributed and are therefore comparisons with other states may not be "apples-to-apples."

This year's budget is therefore less than 1 percent higher than last year's—a rate of growth that is less than that rate of inflation.

Despite our efforts to contain spending, the property tax increase associated with this year's budget, however, will be 7.99%, due to factors other than school spending. To state this more clearly, less than 1 percent of the property tax increase is due to budget increases, and over 7 percent is due to pressures from Montpelier.

Those pressures are not new. In 2000, Montpelier paid over 42% of the Education Fund, leaving 57% to come from property taxes. By 2015, that 33% came from the State, with 67% from property taxes. One of the problems with this trend is that the property tax is regressive—those with less pay a higher percentage of their income for property taxes.

There is a bill in the legislature now to address the problem of relying on the property tax to fund education and the Board is maintaining close communications with our legislators. I think the bill has merit, and hope it moves us to a more sustainable and fair distribution of the responsibility for funding education. That said, this year we face a property tax increase that is not easy to accept.

I am not going to downplay the concerns folks have about rising property taxes. They are real, especially for those on a fixed income. That said, the District has worked hard to spend tax dollars wisely while improving the quality of education for all of our students. This is a multi-year endeavor. There are enhancements many of us would like to see, such as a foreign language program that ensures all of our students graduate with fluency in a second language. While I cannot promise that we will get there in the short term, we have and continue to build the foundations for such aspirations for our district.

Please feel free to email or call me with your comments and concerns.

Sincerely,
Stephanie Seguino
Ward 6 Commissioner

Note from Burlington School District: This note was written by Board Vice-Chair Seguino and originally appeared on Front Porch Forum on Feb. 2nd