

**PTO Council Meeting
April 1, 2014
100 Walnut Street
MEETING MINUTES**

Attendees:

Dr. David Fleishman, Superintendent
Joe Russo, Assistant Superintendent
Elementary Education

Jason Wong, Burr
Vanessa Allen, Cabot
Erin Edwards, Cabot
Anne Kalis, Countryside
Julie Pinto, Franklin
Kim Thurmond, Mason-Rice
Karen Manning, Underwood
Cindy Henry, Ward
Linda Gillespie, Ward
Carol Roe, Williams
Helen Haley, Zervas
Amy Waksler, Zervas
Julie Bourgoin, Bigelow
Sally Brickell, NNHS
Lynne Leblanc, NNHS

Executive Board

Jennifer Abbott, Co-president
Frieda Dweck, Co-president
Theresa Fitzpatrick, Co-president
Rebeca Craig, Treasurer
Andrea Steenstrup, Equity Representative
Marcia Tabenken, Political Action
May Chiu, Elementary Representative
Sue Flicop, Secondary Representative
Caroline Wilson, Website Manager

PTO Presidents by School

Natali Atri, Angier
Anabel Cable, Angier

Next Meeting Dates

Tuesday, May 13, 2014 – 7:30 pm Newton North High School
Thursday, June 12, 2014 – 9:00 – 10:30 am

Superintendent's Update

Budget Update: Dr. Fleishman provided a “crisp” (his word) overview of his recent budget presentation to the School Committee. He opened up his review by commenting on how far we have come since he first arrived in Newton as superintendent. When he first arrived, the budget process involved deciding how and where to cut the budget and programming. Since passage of the override, that has all changed. There is currently no budget gap.

A copy of the power point presentation that the Superintendent went through can be found here:
<http://www3.newton.k12.ma.us/sites/default/files/users/44/FY15%20Superintendent%27s%20Budget%20Presentation%20Powerpoint%20-%202013-14.pdf>

To see the Superintendent's Budget Presentation to the School Committee:
<http://www3.newton.k12.ma.us/news/budgetpresentation2014#.UzxAA41OXVg>

To read the proposed budget:

http://www3.newton.k12.ma.us/sites/default/files/users/44/FY15%20Superintendent%27s%20Proposed%20Budget_0.pdf

Highlights from the superintendent's overview include:

- An overall 3.7% increase in the budget from last year.
- Budget increases reflect growing student population. Over the last 9 years, student population has increased over 10%. Next year, student population is expected to increase by 1.2%, and over the next 5 years by 4%.
- Biggest growth in the special population was in ELL students.

Key budget changes:

- Increase in budget for technology (stated that standard for technology is ambitious and that budget might not be sufficient to sustain standard)
- Therapeutic coordinator will now be employed on a full time basis (previously was only a part time position) to serve the mental and social welfare needs of students
- Mobile Stabilization program – instead of sending children in crisis to the Franklin school, the stabilization program is mobile and can come to each student's individual school.
- Reduction in the number of co-taught classrooms (in light of a reduction in the number of children needing the assistance of this kind of classroom)
- Increase in the number of FTEs (full time employees) at the high schools
- Elimination of bus fees for elementary school students

Other changes:

- Expanding buffer zones in the elementary school districts
- Recognize need to redistrict in the near future
- Common Core and PARCC to continue
- Due to increasing enrollment at the schools, the city is benefiting from additional state aide (Chapter 70) funds

Technology Funding Updates: The budget provides for the following increases in technology funding:

- \$150,000 for a new data system
- \$ 50,000 for technology equipment.

In addition, Boston College has recently agreed to provide Newton Public Schools with a grant of \$100,000 a year for the next three years for technology.

Status of PARCC: In response to a question about the status of the PARCC tests, Dr. Fleishman and Assistant Superintendent Joe Russo provided the following information:

9 out of 15 elementary schools, and all the secondary schools in a portion of their classes, are participating in practice trials for the new PARCC test. For those schools participating in the trials, principals sent out letters informing parents of the test. (If you did not receive a letter from the principal of your child's school, it is likely your school is not participating.)

Here is a link to the letter the Superintendent sent out recently regarding the new PARCC tests:
<http://www3.newton.k12.ma.us/news/PARCC#.UzxJAIIOXVg>

From the PARCC tests recently administered, data will be gathered about the relative difficulties of the test. Tests will be analyzed by professional testing companies and compared with equivalent tests across the country.

Some examples of what is tested: reading two different stories and comparing the two stories to each other. More analytical. More demanding reading. Complex non-fiction reading. Students are asked to give opinions, rather than just one right answer.

Materials tested on PARCC align with Common Core. Similar to the MCAS requirements now, students in high school will have had to pass PARCC as a graduation requirement.

They expect scores of the initial tests to go down compared to recent MCAS results because of the change in the nature of the tests.

Question: PARCC is supposed to be administered by computers. How will that work? How are third graders, who are not yet familiar with keyboarding, supposed to take test?
Answer: Administration is aware that they have to implement the infrastructure necessary for the test taking. Tests are currently being administered both by computer and paper and pencil. Will probably continue that way for a while. Acknowledged that there has been some push back from superintendents across the country regarding the technology requirement for the test taking.

Some of the push back regarding the tests that educators have been hearing across the country:

- Tests too hard
- Difficulties in administering because of technology
- If grades go down, will negatively impact evaluation of teachers. Still have to figure out impact of initial lower scores on teacher evaluations. (Some concern that teachers might express unwillingness to have lower performing students in their classes, if it effects their evaluations.)

PTOC Budget Update (Rebeca Craig, PTO Council Treasurer)

Income

Amount currently in account:	\$15,428.78
Includes dues collected this year:	\$ 2,000.00
Additional dues to be deposited	\$ 625.00

Expenses

Expenses incurred to date:	\$ 724.00
Expenses Currently Pending:	
Helmets for Bike Safety Program	\$ 452.00
Cabot/Mason-Rice Speaker Event:	\$ 500.00

Sue Flicop, a former PTO Council president, mentioned that, periodically, the coffers of the PTO Council get larger than needed and the council is encouraged to come up with ideas for disbursing that excess income.

Theresa Fitzpatrick echoed Sue's sentiments, and encouraged all PTOs to let the co-presidents know if there are speaker events or other events for which they needed financial help from the council, and to think of other creative ways for the PTO Council to use its surplus funds. Two examples include the recent funding of a speaker event being jointly sponsored by the Cabot and Mason-Rice PTOs, and the purchase of helmets for the Elementary School Bike Safety Program.

The speaker event begin sponsored jointly by the Cabot and Mason-Rice PTOs and the PTO Council, The Futures of Learning in a Networked World, will be held on Wednesday, April 9th, from 7:00-8:30pm, at Mason-Rice. More information about that event can be found here: <http://newtonptocouncil.org/2014/03/30/technology-speaker-free-event/>

Vote to Contribute to Newton School's Foundation Celebration of Excellence

(Theresa Fitzpatrick)

A motion was made to contribute \$1,000 to the Newton School's Foundation to purchase a table (or the price of 20 admissions) to the Celebration of Excellence event, at which nine outstanding individuals who have had a profound impact on the Newton Public Schools will be honored.

The vote was unanimous.

The Celebration of Excellence event will take place on May 3, at Newton North High School.

A description of Newton School's Foundation Celebration of Excellence and list of honorees can be found here: <http://www.newtonschoolsfoundation.org/>

Best Budget Practices (Andrea Steenstrup, PTO Council Equity Representative)

Andrea presented a sample budget, and explained that there is really no one right way of doing a budget. Different schools do it differently, and that is okay. Also, she explained that schools have used both Quicken and Quick Books, and either one works well.

A few key items that were highlighted for budgeting purposes:

- PTO budget that is presented to the parent community can be shown as a net number and is sometimes easier to explain. However, when filing tax returns, the budget must show expenses netted out of gross revenue.
- The best practice is to separate out equity budget items from non-equity items. That way, the PTO will always have a sense of how much they are allowed to spend for equity items, and helps keep a tally of how much they are spending.

- PTOs should keep money in reserve. This insures that there are always sufficient funds to pay for expenses, even if a fundraiser is less successful than anticipated. This can also help with cash flow when revenue is slow to come in (for example, at the beginning of a school year). Andrea recommended a reserve equal to one-half of what is raised.
- It is good to show reserve accounts for things such as technology and playgrounds, where you might be accumulating funds over several years to pay for big ticket items.

Andrea encouraged all PTO presidents to have their treasurers contact her if they wanted more in depth information about budgeting, or just had some questions. Andrea is also more than willing to help schools fill out their equity reports in the fall.

Update to Equity Policy (Assistant Superintendent Joe Russo)

Joe Russo summed up the reasons for the proposed changes to the equity policy and the School Department's position with respect to the proposed equity policy.

He began by stating, emphatically, that the School Department (SD) believes that technology should be part of equity, and that PTOs should be freed from the obligation to fund technology.

He understands that moving to a technology cap, as originally proposed, seemed too quick and too drastic to many PTOs. His take away from the last meeting was that if everyone was at the standard, the cap would seem reasonable, but since so many schools are still not at the standard, they wanted to have the ability to catch up. After meeting with the PTO Council co-presidents and brainstorming some alternative solutions, the idea of having the Equity Committee approve spending above the cap was developed.

He thinks this is a good transition plan. For PTOs it is good because:

- it still allows PTOs to fundraise for technology,
- allows PTOs to bank funds that are raised for bigger purchases,
- gives schools an opportunity to come up to the standard.

For the School Department the benefits are:

- having Equity Committee involved in fundraising decisions insures that the SD is connected to technology fundraising
- SD can let PTOs that want to fundraise know what the SD plans are for technology. They might already have a plan to fund the devices that the PTOs are thinking of fundraising for
- SD can make sure the technology purchases are in line with the rest of the schools
- SD can suggest adjustments to the PTOs fundraising goals based on what they have planned and what is needed in the rest of the school system

The hope is that, over the years, the SD will be able to catch up to technology fundraising. And that, after time, won't need the Equity Committee and technology will be fully included in equity.

Expressed that the PTO Council has been doing a lot of good work on the equity policy, and dealing with an issue that has been lingering for a long time. Improvements to the equity policy have been needed.

Finally, related that there have been parents who have appeared at School Committee meetings to discuss this issue that have not been happy with the School Committee's lack of response. He explained that the members of the School Committee feel bad that they can't comment, but they are in a tricky position in that they can't express a personal view outside of a public meeting, and since they have not been formally presented with the proposal, they cannot express opinions on it.

Proposal will be presented to the School Committee at its next meeting on April 7. When it is presented, different opinions and points of view of all the council will be presented as well. Eager to hear their thoughts about it at that time, when they can speak freely.

Questions/Comments:

(Answers provided by Joe Russo, except where indicated)

Newton North concerns:

Q: Since technology changes so rapidly, concerned that SD will not be able to make changes quick enough, whereas PTOs can.

A: SD wants schools to stay within the standard since more recently there has been an emphasis on ensuring technology purchases are connected to the curriculum/educational component of the technology. Technology purchases are now guided by the needs of the classroom. The new technology might not fit within that standard and within the curriculum. (A question was raised about the smartboards that were purchased by PTOs several years ago – it was explained that the smartboard push was an NSF initiative, was not tied to curriculum, had not been fully flushed out, and at the time the SD was still trying to catch up its curriculum needs to the current technology. Different situation now.)

Q: If funding for technology has to come from city and city tax dollars, concerned that since only 20% of citizens are parents, the majority of tax payers will not vote for tax increases to pay for technology at the schools. Believes asking just parents for funding, through PTO fundraising, will be more effective.

A: All funding for education is from city tax dollars, and thinks this would within the normal standards.

Sue Flicop added additional comment: Part of what we do as a community is pay for expenses that don't directly benefit us. Although seniors are a small part of a community, our taxes go to support senior services.

Q: The recent chromebook challenge at NNHS was a coordinated effort between the principal and Leo Brehm. Concerned that if all requests for additional funding have to go through one individual, Leo Brehm, he won't be able to handle the influx of requests

A: Equity Committee will be handling requests, but as Director of Information Technology, Leo Brehm is already involved in all decisions relating to technology.

Q: Concerned that there will not be opportunities for "educational excellence programs", or pilots.

A: Still room for pilot programs, only more thoughtful pilots. Rather than individual schools going off on their own, the pilot programs would have to be coordinated with the overall school plan – teachers would have to understand how the new technology works, and the technology has to be appropriate for the classroom. Since this policy effects elementary

schools, have to realize that not all state of the art technology is appropriate for that age group. That has to be considered in decision of whether to pilot something new. The elementary school curriculum may not have a need for all the current bells and whistles of the newest technology.

Jennifer Abbott explained that the policy allows for changes to the standard. The standard could always be expended to include new devices.

Q: How will Newton supply the budget for technology? What revenue sources?

A: Admitted that is the missing link. Budget for technology has increased over time, but still not enough. Looking for other sources of revenue. Boston College grant that the superintendent mentioned is one source. Would like parents to look for resources beyond the PTOs.

Q: What is difference between funding by parents through PTOs and funding through private sources like BC?

A: BC funding comes from a source other than parents, which is what the SD would prefer. *Sue Flicop* explained that when BC gives funds, the SD gets the money and it is divided up among the district. When PTOs give money for technology, it almost always goes to only one school.

Final Newton North comment: NNHS does not support the proposal. Would rather let PTOs continue to fund technology. Would like to explore idea of PTO fundraising for a common pot that can be split between schools.

Joe Russo response: While idea of putting money into a kitty that can be distributed to schools on an as needed basis makes sense as a community, the problem is that when something similar has been proposed, most schools are not able to raise the money for that. While this is not a pretty outcome, it is the reality that there is a disincentive to raise money for a school that is not your own child's school. There is not a groundswell of support for this idea.

Andrea Steenstrup commented that, at Cabot, not only do parents not want to contribute for other schools, they want to make sure that the PTO is spending the money on technology now, so that their own children can directly benefit from the new technology.

Ward Concerns:

Q: They would like to see an escape hatch from the restricted spending on technology for years when budgeting becomes difficult again, and cuts are being made to programs.

A: If there is an issue in any particular year, come to the Equity Committee. If SD knows it won't be able to fund that year, will allow PTO to fund.

Jennifer Abbott commented: This goes back to idea of equity. If budget does change, and other programming is not funded due to lack of funds, that lack of funding will be balanced across all schools. That way, it is not only the schools that have better fundraising capabilities that get what they need.

Q: Concerned about replacement. The amount allowed under the cap would not be enough to replace all the devices that become old at once.

A: Can request exemption from Equity Committee. Equity Committee will be looking at the age of devices when determining if funding should be allowed.

Jennifer Abbott commented: This provides an opportunity for all players to come together and flush out discrepancies about the age and abilities of devices.

Zervas Concern:

Q: PTOs have to fundraise significantly anyway. Typically, they have applied surplus funds from other fundraisers towards technology. This policy ties their hands as to what they can do with the surplus.

A: *Marcia Tebenken* responded. Problem with that is exactly the problem that these proposed changes are trying to address. There are some schools that never have a surplus, or that never even meet their fundraising goals for other equity items. The purpose is to create equity among schools as to spending. That is what the equity policy does for other programs. Can't buy musical instruments for kids who can't afford to play in instrumental music programs because of policy – should be the same for technology.

Cabot Concern:

Q: Why does there have to be a separate cap for technology? If the technology cap were included with the cap for other equity items, there would be more flexibility.

A: *Jennifer Abbott* responded: Many schools don't have ability to reach the cap in other equity areas. If the caps are combined, those schools might have to sacrifice other things (like Creative Arts & Sciences) for technology. Also, by keeping a separate cap for technology, makes it easier for SD to keep track of technology spending.

Other Questions and Concerns

Q: Superintendent says that PTOs raising money for technology allows SD to funnel money somewhere else. Isn't this still true?

A: That has been the thinking until now. However, the SD believes that technology is equity and should be treated that way going forward. In addition, there has been some pushback from schools about that approach. Schools complaining about why they didn't get equipment provided to other schools. Also, some instances of schools putting PTO purchased equipment into rooms where they are not needed so that they can get equipment SD is paying for. Hoping that under new policy, SD will have a better handle of the technology inventory and will control purchases centrally.

Q: Any hope of bringing back deliberations by alderman of naming rights?

A: Not a lot of support for that now.

Q: How about trying to create a central pool of funding for all Newton schools?

A: Attempts in past have been unsuccessful. Little appetite by community to support funding of technology that doesn't benefit their own children.

Other Comments:

Carol Roe (Williams PTO): If technology follows curriculum, seems black and white that technology should come under equity.

Sue Flicop (Secondary Schools Rep): Sense that PTOs want to be out of technology fundraising business, and would rather spend their efforts on fun stuff, like community building. This issue has been deliberated for years. Because of frequent turnover of PTO presidents, never seems to get resolved. It was decided about 10-15 years ago that technology is not equity. SD was supposed to fund less fortunate schools. Has not happened. Now technology is more like textbooks. Should take the opportunity now to go to School Committee and let them figure out where additional funding for technology should come from.

May Chiu (Elementary Schools Rep): Technology is part of curriculum. PTOs should not be primary source of funding. We should tell School Committee to do something. Also, the proposal still allows PTOs to fund some portion of technology. Can fundraise, can bank money, and then can seek approval of Equity Committee to spend it. Possible issues can be that Equity Committee process too bureaucratic. Can be clarified.

Vanessa Allen (Cabot PTO): Discussion tonight has been awesome, but wants to have more discussions and sharing of information. Uncomfortable about timeline for process.

Julie Bourgoin (Bigelow PTO): :Thinks the need to fundraise for technology is killing the PTOs. PTOs are like fundraising machines. Wants it to stop.

Timeline for Vote on Equity Policy:

Theresa Fitzpatrick laid out plan for next steps on equity policy. Involves vote of PTO Council and eventual vote of School Committee. Vote of School Committee would be required, as the equity policy is the instrument of the School Committee, and they would need to approve any amendments to it.

April 7 PTO Council co-presidents and Joe Russo to present proposed changes to equity policy to School Committee. It is necessary to present to the School Committee at a public meeting in order to allow the School Committee members the ability to discuss the equity policy. School Committee will not vote at this meeting, will just listen and ask high level questions and vote won't take place until a later meeting, so there will be time to communicate the PTO Council vote to the School Committee before the School Committee votes.

- April 16** Votes of all PTOs due. Asking that PTOs send in their votes by email. It is not required, but **suggested that PTOs give an explanation of why they voted the way they did**, so that there is additional information about what issues continue to be bothersome, and what issues there is agreement on.
- April 28** Follow up School Committee meeting. Possible they will vote, or offer proposed amendments to policy.

Concerns expressed about the order – that the equity policy is being presented to the School Committee before a vote of the council. May appear that there is consensus from the PTO Council on the proposed changes, and it is possible that there is not. Also, concerns expressed that the presentation of the proposed changes to the equity policy will not accurately reflect the opinions of the members of the council.

Joe Russo and PTO Council co-presidents assured everyone that the presentation to the School Committee would convey the concerns expressed by members of the council.