

4/16/24

Dear Chairman Freedman, Vice Chairman Rinaldi, Mr. Alswanger, Ms. Burwick, Mr. Mahoney, and Mr. McMullen:

My name is Marianne Vakos and I am an English Language Teacher at Roxbury Elementary School. I am a Stamford resident and I have worked for Stamford Public Schools for 2 years. I am writing today to request that the Board of Finance approve the Board of Education's FY25 proposed operating budget as submitted. If the budget is cut, then our schools and city will suffer. Investing in public education is not only a sound financial decision but also a moral imperative that benefits individuals, communities, and society as a whole. By supporting education, we invest in the future prosperity and well-being of our nation.

As a Stamford Public Schools educator, I know firsthand how crucial this funding is to the future of our district. Consider the following:

- Stamford has a larger percentage of high needs students (65%) than our neighbors in Greenwich, New Canaan, or Darien. High needs students require significantly more support to reach their academic potential; support that is only possible through adequate funding. Despite this, our average spending per-pupil lags behind Greenwich, New Canaan, and Darien and many other communities with a lower percentage of high-needs students.
- Without adequate funding, many of the programs that challenge our most academically motivated high school students will be in jeopardy. Stamford Public Schools currently offers more Advanced Placement courses than any other district in the state, and specialized programs such as the Academy of Finance, Early College Studies, the High School of Business, International Baccalaureate, and Regional Agriscience offer opportunities for our students to distinguish themselves academically. We should be investing to grow these programs, not worrying about whether they will be funded from year to year.
 - Like districts around the country, Stamford's instrumental music program was decimated during COVID. Over the last two years, our dedicated music teachers have worked hard to start rebuilding the K-12 instrumental music program. Reducing the budget would put this progress at risk, despite research showing that playing a musical instrument supports academic achievement. For many of our students, their only opportunity to learn a musical instrument is through the school music program.
- Our non-certified staff are integral to the successful operation of our schools. Teachers rely heavily on parent facilitators to help us connect with families in their native language, and to help families navigate the complexities of a large urban school system. Parent facilitators are one of the crucial components of education in Stamford Public Schools. I believe that parent facilitators are essential to our district, and we must make sure that their jobs are secure! I have

seen firsthand the impact our parent facilitator, Noemi Berkoff, has on our school community. She works tirelessly to help our families get the support they need and to ensure our families are engaged in the school community. Parent facilitators work hard to build trusting relationships with families. Research shows that when parents are actively engaged in their student's learning, it leads to better academic performance and overall well-being. According to a 2019 American Psychological Association review of 448 independent studies on parent involvement, students show higher academic achievement, school engagement, and motivation when parents are involved in their children's schooling. This review also showed that parent involvement has a positive impact on students' social and emotional skills and decreases instances of delinquency. Parent facilitators play a role in ensuring that all parents, regardless of background or circumstances, have equal access to information and resources. This helps promote equity in education. They do so much including: helping new families feel welcome to the school community, connecting families in need to services and resources, helping families navigate the parent portal and sign required documents, following up with parents in regards to chronic absenteeism and other issues, holding monthly parent meetings, providing interpretation for all school events, helping to coordinate interpreters for parent teacher conferences, and so much more. The role of a parent facilitator is essential for building strong partnerships between parents and our schools, fostering a positive educational environment, and ultimately contributing to the success and well-being of students. Security staff not only monitor for external threats, they help manage student behavior. Losing these and other critical positions would put an added burden on teachers at a time when we are still trying to help students recover from COVID-era learning loss and a rise in mental health challenges.

- Kindergarten paraeducators are also at risk. Kindergarten paras help maintain order and ensure a safe and structured learning environment. Every child learns differently, and kindergarten paras help teachers implement differentiated instruction strategies to meet the diverse needs of students. They may work with small groups or individual students to provide additional instruction or reinforcement tailored to their learning styles and abilities. Kindergarten paras often form strong bonds with students, providing them with emotional support, encouragement, and positive reinforcement. These relationships help create a nurturing and inclusive classroom environment where children feel valued and supported in their learning journey. Paras are role models that our students see themselves in and identify with. Overall, kindergarten paras play a vital role in enhancing the quality of education and fostering the holistic development of young children in kindergarten classrooms. Their contributions help ensure that every student receives the attention, support, and resources they need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.
- Another position at risk is the Technology Integration and Support Specialists (TISS). They are a critical part of making the technology in our schools work. Teachers rely on technology to teach. Without this position, technology issues will be yet another burden that will fall on teachers. Also, technology education encourages critical thinking and

problem-solving skills. Students learn to analyze problems, design solutions, and troubleshoot issues, which are valuable skills applicable across various domains, not just in technology. The future job market will heavily rely on technology. Technology is increasingly integrated into various subjects, from science and math to humanities and arts. TISS collaborate with other educators to integrate technology into their curriculum, enhancing learning experiences and making subjects more engaging and relevant for students. TISS educate students about responsible technology use, including digital citizenship, online safety, and ethical considerations in technology development and usage. These lessons are essential for fostering responsible digital citizens who understand the implications of their actions in the digital world. In summary, TISS are essential to education because they equip students with the skills, knowledge, and mindset needed to thrive in a technology-driven world. They play a pivotal role in preparing students for future success and empowering them to become responsible, innovative, and digitally literate citizens.

- I also want to voice my support for the English Language Learner Department. We have over 3051 English Learners that need our support. Please approve the budget so we can provide our students with the quality education they deserve. EL tutors really help our students grow. Also the work of the TOSAs and PD for mainstream teachers really helps them to better be able to support their rising number of ELs.
- The BOE's proposed budget already reflects a net loss of 52 full-time equivalent positions, including 35 teaching positions. Absorbing additional cuts beyond these would be detrimental to students.

I understand that you have to balance many competing priorities. However, ensuring that we have the funding to provide every child with a quality public education must be a priority for our elected officials and our entire community.

I hope you will take the above into consideration when you vote on the BOE's FY25 proposed budget.

Respectfully,

Marianne Vakos

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