Finance and Warrant Committee

10/11/2017

Kevin Preston, David Roberts, Susan Fay, Kevin Hughes, Marty Lindemann and Sue Carney present

John Heffernan, Cecilia Emery Butler, and Liz O’Donnell not present throughout, .

The meeting was called to order at 6:42.

Mr. Preston offered the opportunity for public comment. There was none.

Ms. Terkelsen began the town’s presentation on municipal benchmarking.

Ms. Terkelsen explained the benchmarking initiative paperwork that had been handed out to the committee. She said that this same information had been sent out in a bulletin to members of town government. She clarified that each department had been provided suggestions for what data sets they should provide data for. However, each department was given the opportunity to review those suggestions and provide alternatives or additions. Ms. Terkelsen listed which departments reported and which did not. The next deadline will be the Town Manager’s hearings with the Finance and Warrant Committee. This will be to provide exact definitions for each benchmarking data point.

Mr. Preston asked when they expected to received data from their comparison communities. Ms. Terkelsen stated that gathering data from other communities will likely prove difficult. The town will have to send surveys to neighboring communities and attempt to glean data from their websites. They will also need time to selectively discern which data points are affected by mitigating factors.

Mr. Kern suggested the committee select specifics they wished to focus on so they could get them complete in a timely fashion.

Mr. Preston raised the concern that some of the departments that did not respond may not be sending a message of tacit approval but rather might mean they have not yet begun the process. He raised a second concern that we may find that when we collect data from neighboring towns they measure different data points than we do. Mr. Kern answered that their primary concern is generating useable data.

Mr. Roberts asked for Ms. Terkelsen to clarify if she was looking for input from the committee on which data points are their primary focus. Ms. Terkelsen answered that they are not looking for the committee to prioritize everything, but rather to raise any specific concerns they have.

Mr. Preston agreed that they are interested in getting metrics to evaluate several major factors such as healthcare costs and full-time employee counts.

Ms. Carney pointed out that the committee does not wish to slow down the town governance with this data collection, but to evaluate the measures that are most useful but also doable. Mr. Preston agreed that the goal is not to distract the town departments by forcing them to collect data but rather to encourage them to start comparing themselves to other towns.

Mr. Kern suggested that some departments already do this, but the departments that do not have the data as readily at hand

Mr. Preston asked if departments that are answerable to different committees, like schools, were being included in this process. Ms. Terkelsen answered yes.

Ms. Fay asked who would be gathering and managing this data. Ms. Terkelsen expressed a hope that this data could be stored centrally and kept by the town. Town management concluded their presentation.

The school committee, Superintendent Michael Welch and Assistant Superintendent of Business and Finance Samuel Rippin, took the floor.

Mr. Welch explained the benchmarking data that had been handed out to the committee. He said that the school is attempting to cultivate a data-rich culture and he looks forward to further participating in the benchmarking process.

Marty Lindemann arrived at 7:16

Mr. Welch explained that the state recently joined a federal program that put into place an “accountability system” as part of the ESSA(Every Student Succeeds Act). He clarified that a major factor in determining comparable towns was the quantity of high needs students.

The first category of high needs student is “Economically Disadvantaged.”

The second category of high needs student is ELL (English Language Learner). These students have dedicated English as a Second Language teacher for the first three years of their education.

The third category of high needs student is FLNE (First Language is Not English). These are students who have multiple languages spoken in their homes where English is not the primary language. This percentage is typically higher than ELL.

Ms. Carney asked for clarification on the ranges that were selected for each of these graphs. She also asked about variations within our school system among different schools. Mr. Welch promised he would touch on that later.

The fourth category of high needs student is SWD (Students with Disabilities). These are students who have been identified with a specific disability that requires a written Individualized Education Plan. Our SWD percentage has increased a bit lately, probably as the result of attempting to keep more students in-district.

Mr. Welch explained that no matter how many of these categories a student fits into, the category of high needs is binary. A student either counts as a high needs student or does not, regardless of how many categories they fit into.

Mr. Welch then explained that when generating comparables, he narrowed the candidate school districts to those within 500 students of ours. Using the categories of high needs students and district size, Mr. Welch selected Ashland, Northampton, Hudson, Saugus, and Watertown as good comparables.

Mr. Welch then reviewed standardized testing performance.

MA has a 5 tiered accountability level system, where 1 is the best and 5 is problematic. Dedham is Level 2, and some of our comparable towns are 3. This chart also contained information on our Student Growth percentile, which is the level of improvement year-over-year in comparable students.

Ms. Carney asked Mr. Welch to further clarify the meaning of the MA accountability levels. She explained that the MA levels focus on measuring rate of growth and narrowing the gap between highest and lowest-achieving students, not altogether performance.

Mr. Welch also provided data on neighboring districts. Ms. Carney asked that they continue providing data on Norwood school district.

Mr. Welch provided the committee with a 2014-15 school year breakdown of the Per Pupil spending in Dedham. He provided an advanced breakdown of the individual items that make up each section of our per-pupil spending evaluation.

Mr. Rippin took the floor to better explain the financials of the Per Pupil spending value. He gave the example of the Administration subheading, which contains some positions that actually operate in a supplemental education position. He enumerated the purposes of the components of each subheader.

Mr. Preston suggested that they breakdown the differences between them and comparable towns who spend less per-pupil. Mr. Welch agreed.

Mr. Roberts asked how the maintenance employees who do facilities for both schools and municipal are allocated in the budget. Mr. Rippin answered that they are counted entirely within the school budget. There are 7 full time employees who match this description.

Mr. Roberts asked about teacher retirement benefits that the school is paying for. Mr. Rippin explained it was in one of the budget subheaders.

Mr. Rippin explained that out-of-district student placements incur heavy costs to the school district. Furthermore, out-of-district placements of choice and charter school children incur significantly lower costs than out-of-district placement of special needs children.

Ms. Carney pointed out that the reason for our low rate of out-of-district choice children may be because our adjacent school districts are not accepting of out-of-district students.

Mr. Lindemann asked if Blue Hills technical or Norfolk agricultural schools are counted in our out-of-district expenditures.

Mr. Roberts asked how Mr. Rippin had generated the table that he was using to explain the per-pupil spending breakdown. Mr. Rippin answered that it came from the department of education.

Ms. Fay asked Mr. Rippin about the values used in the comparison to other districts. Mr. Rippin clarified that these “in-district expenses” are the per-pupil costs minus the out of district placement costs.

Ms. Fay pointed out that she has no problem having the per-pupil costs above the state average expenditure. She likes the idea that our school district is spending extra to provide an exceptional education.

Mr. Lindemann asked where kids from our district attend when they are going out of district to other schools. Mr. Welch promised to gather that information and give it to the committee. Mr. Rippin explained that students with special needs typically have a school chosen based on their needs.

Mr. Welch reviewed our AP statistics. He explained that Dedham has a higher percentage of students taking at least one AP exam than when compared to some comparable towns.

Ms. Carney explained that while this percentage is a good statistic, the value of students taking these exams is closely locked in to the success of the students taking the test. She asked for the context of our scores.

Mr. Welch expressed intent to try to create a systemic approach to encouraging more students to participate in AP exams.

Mr. Welch reviewed the Dedham dropout rate. There has been a significant decline over the last 10 years. Mr. Lindemann asked how closely they had to track dropout rates in students. Mr. Welch explained that the state determines if a student dropped out by recording when students are reported to have moved, and then the state investigates whether they have indeed switched school districts.

Mr. Preston suggested that the charts contain the same set of comparable towns on every chart, or a limited set of comparable town groups across multiple towns. This is so they can be parsed more easily.

Mr. Lindemann raised the concern that we might be interested in understanding why some towns are sending significant quantity of students to charter schools.

Ms. Carney asked if Saugus had full-day kindergarten. It does not. Ms. Carney suggested that students may be entering the charter system through kindergartens and just staying there.

Mr. Welch reviewed Dedham’s SAT enrollment and average scores.

Mr. Welch presented a table of data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which tracks higher education enrollment rates from various school districts. He admitted surprise that the statistics do not seem to line up with self-reporting from high school seniors. Mr. Welch reviewed self-reported end of year plans from high school graduates.

Mr. Welch explained that some publication’s “best schools” rankings have a tendency to have inconsistent methodology. He does not feel that these provide a valid look at the actual challenges of public education.

Ms. Carney suggested that it is important to consider class sizes and staffing levels in our schools, and many publications do not.

Mr. Lindemann suggested it would be helpful to increase tracking of how students perform post-graduation, in the several years to follow. Mr. Welch acknowledged that that may be valuable but as a public school they do not track students after graduation. Mr. Lindemann suggested that an inability to track the outcomes of our education processes leads to more speculation than is healthy in the decision making process.

Ms. Fay said that it would be very valuable to know how kids perform in their first year of college.

Ms. Carney agreed that can be valuable to track this data.

Mr. Preston asked if any other district undertook this sort of long-term tracking. Mr. Welch explained that they have not found any particularly thorough schools nearby. However, it is something they have looked into.

Mr. Bilafer suggested that he does not feel self-reported data has much value in this situation. Mr. Preston suggested that we may be able to get it done by partnering with academia.

Mr. Welch emphasized the importance of helping high needs students meet their potential and giving them the opportunity to succeed.

Ms. Carney warned the committee not to get fixated on demographics. She suggested that we need to avoid allowing demographic information to affect our expectations of our students. She raised concerns that teachers are allowing demographics to change the standards to which they hold their students.

Mr. Preston thanked Mr. Welch for the data he provided.

Mr. Welch stated that he unequivocally feels that there is no excuse to hold our students to anything but a high standard and that our goal always needs to help all students to succeed.

Mr. Lindemann asked if there was presently a process that allows students to evaluate teachers. Mr. Welch answered no.

Mr. Lindemann raised the point that it does not seem difficult to gather this data from the students. He suggested that there may be insight to be gained from speaking with students.

Mr. Roberts thanked Mr. Rippin for his efforts.

Mr. Roberts motioned to adjourn, Ms. Fay seconded. It was voted 9-0.