

CHELMSFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Jay Lang, Ed.D., Superintendent

Memorandum

To: Members of the School Committee
From: Jay Lang, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools
Date: July 3, 2020
Re: Chelmsford Public Schools: 2019/20 Year in Review

As I reflect on my fifth year leading the Chelmsford Public Schools (CPS), I am deeply grateful for the encouragement and support I have received from students, parents, staff, and community members; I feel privileged to work with you as superintendent. I do not take the opportunity to lead this district lightly. Your support for our students is truly remarkable, and I look forward to working with you and the greater Chelmsford community as we build on past successes in the district and work to make CPS the best public school system in the state.

We have accomplished much over this past year. I am very proud of our work, and I thank you for guiding and supporting me and the CPS staff as we strive to address students' academic, social, and emotional needs. I feel encouraged every day when I walk through schools, attend events, and witness firsthand the dedication to meeting student needs shown by our teachers, paraprofessionals, building administrators, and support staff.

This past year was truly like no other, what began as a regular school year ended with the statewide closure of schools in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On Friday March 13, 2020 our staff and students left school for the weekend and didn't return for in-person instruction for the remainder of the year. I am particularly proud of how our staff and students, supported by their parents, came together initially to maintain connections and support one another. Our priority was for the health, safety and wellness of our students and staff during the closure. While the district planned for remote learning, our staff initially provided their students with enrichment activities to maintain their skills as teachers were provided professional development, access to technology resources, and prepared to reengage their students in learning. As the weeks passed, our teachers and support staff shifted from traditional in-person instruction to remote learning using a variety of technology resources. It was a learning experience for all, and all stepped up to the challenge to make the very best of a difficult situation.

As our non-traditional school year ended in mid-June, and students and staff left for the summer break, our focus now shifts to planning and preparation for the re-opening of

schools in the fall of 2020. What “school” will look like in the fall, we don’t know. What I do know is that whatever form schooling takes, in-person, remote or a hybrid solution, Chelmsford students and staff will rise to the occasion and provide a rigorous academic experience while ensuring the health, safety and welfare of all students and staff are at the forefront of decision making.

Following are some highlights of our collective work this year:

FY2019 Massachusetts DESE Financial Audit

Every year, each school district in Massachusetts must submit an external audit of their end-of-year financial report to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Powers & Sullivan, LLC performed the district’s external financial audit for the year ending June 30, 2019. As noted in the audit report, the auditors had no financial findings or financial reporting recommendations. This outcome is desirable and significant, given the number of financial audits and reviews of CPS conducted in prior fiscal years, each with findings and recommendations for improvement of financial practices.

FY2020 Budget Administration

School Committee members received regular reports on the district’s finances throughout FY2020, including the local operating budget, grant funds, and revolving funds. After reviewing the FY2020 budget, I am pleased to report the district has made great strides in stabilizing its finances. By implementing strict financial practices, it has accrued several reserve fund balances for future budget needs. At the end of FY2020, the district is able to:

- reserve approximately \$ 3 million in the special education circuit breaker revolving fund to pay for future unanticipated/unfunded special education student tuition and/or transportation costs. (By contrast, just five years ago in the fall of 2015, the school department had to request a supplemental appropriation of \$ 500,000 from the town to cover unanticipated special education tuition costs because no reserve fund balance was available.)
- carry over approximately \$ 740,000 in food service/school nutrition funds. This is a significant achievement, given that many school districts find themselves operating their food service programs at a deficit.
- set aside approximately \$1.7 million in school choice funds as a reserve for future spending by the School Committee on educational programs, services to augment current program offerings in the schools, or a contingency in the event of an unanticipated budget shortfall. School choice funds will be utilized annually to support the 1:1 Chromebook initiative.

FY2021 Budget Presentation and Review

In February, the central office presented the FY2021 general fund operating budget to the School Committee, including net school spending compliance and comparable community analysis (demographic and financial). We highlighted the assumptions that underlie the FY2021 budget, including normal step and lane increases, a net decrease in special education tuition costs, the addition of technology support positions at the middle and high school levels, the addition of special education teachers and a board certified behavior analyst (BCBA) position at the elementary level, the establishment and staffing of a middle school level therapeutic program (STRIVE) to provide for a continuum of programming from the elementary level, and staffing to maintain desired class size at all levels of the district. The School Committee held public input sessions and reviewed district-level budget detail and a staff salary book that cross-walked salaries to the main budget document. The budget presented and reviewed was in-line with Town Manager Cohen's original recommended budget increase of \$2 million, \$ 61 million to \$ 63 million, to support the Chelmsford Public Schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit in mid-March and resulted in Town Manager Cohen recommending a reduction to the original budget plans for all Town departments, including the Chelmsford Public Schools. An assumed 20% reduction in local state aid (Chapter 70 and unrestricted general receipts) and downward adjustment of local receipts as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the Chelmsford Public Schools budget being reduced to \$ 61,667,000. To accomplish this budget reduction and maintain the integrity of the programs, services and staffing originally planned for FY21, the school committee 1) reduced the FY21 curriculum adoption line item as the elementary literacy purchase was made with FY20 surplus local operating budget funds, 2) reduced the FY21 employee separation line item as costs previously budgeted in FY21 were paid with FY20 surplus local operating budget funds, and 3) reduced the FY21 out-of-district student tuition account as previously budgeted FY21 expenses were pre-paid with FY20 surplus local operating budget funds as a result of savings in regular and special education student transportation from the school closure and non-performance of service.

At the June 22, 2020 town meeting, representatives once again asked thoughtful questions, received straightforward answers, and approved (unanimously) the FY2021 revised funding request of \$61,667,000 to support CPS.

1:1 Technology Initiative

In FY2019, an *Information Communication and Technology Services Steering Committee* was convened to discuss and plan for a 1:1 Chromebook implementation in the district. The committee's 24 members represented all our stakeholder groups. The committee brought together district and building administrators, teachers, technology integration specialists, technicians, unions, and parents. It was a diverse mix of interested parties,

and everyone worked very hard to make sure critical components for the roll-out were addressed.

The committee followed the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) recommended guidelines to address planning a 1:1 implementation. This gave the committee a good starting point to think about all the changes that teachers, students, and parents would experience as this initiative unfolds. Documentation was produced to serve as a guide for the district as we begin this journey. The plan they developed requires constant revisiting based on administrator, teacher, student, and parent feedback. This is both expected and encouraged. We want the CPS 1:1 initiative to be successful, and it will be, because the approach taken is deliberate and founded in the best instructional practices. Funding to launch the 1:1 Chromebook initiative was approved and the CPS 1:1 Chromebook initiative launched in FY2020.

Ratification of the Chelmsford Professional Support Personnel Collective Bargaining Agreement

In August 2019, the School Committee ratified a three-year contract with the Chelmsford Professional Support Personnel bargaining unit covering the period from July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2022.

Ratification of the Chelmsford Teachers and Nurses Contract

In November 2019, the School Committee ratified a three-year contract with the Chelmsford Teachers and Nurses bargaining unit covering the period from July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2022.

Ratification of the Chelmsford Building Custodians Contract

In April 2020, the School Committee ratified a three-year contract with the Chelmsford Building Custodians bargaining unit covering the period from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2023.

Chapter 70 and Legislative Funding Analysis

The district contracted with Mr. Roger Hatch, retired MA DESE school finance administrator, to author a report detailing how the state funding formula (Ch. 70 aid) affects school finances in Chelmsford – historically, at the present time, and looking into the future – in light of the enacted legislation at the state level.

Elementary Literacy and Reading Program Adoption

During the winter of 2020, the Chelmsford Public Schools (CPS) began piloting reading programs to adopt for the 2020 - 2021 school year. The current reading program, *Journeys* – published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH), was originally adopted and implemented in grades K - 5 beginning in the 2011 - 2012 school year. The current *Journey's* program is no longer being published by HMH, and CPS is no longer able to support this reading program, thus necessitating a new reading program adoption for the 2020 - 2021 school year. Under the co-direction of Assistant Superintendent Hirsch and Kelly Rogers, Coordinator of ELL, Reading and Title I Services, a group of teachers representing all grade levels and schools K - 4 were assembled to pilot two reading programs – *Into Reading* published by HMH and *Fountas & Pinnell Classroom*, published by Heinemann. After reviewing all the data and reflecting on the process, it was determined that CPS will be using *Fountas and Pinnell Classroom* beginning in the 2020 - 2021 school year. The pilot teachers for both programs and the administrators put a tremendous amount of time, effort, and thoughtful feedback into each program. These teachers and administrators were intragyrally in making the final decision for our district.

CPS Strategic Planning: 2020 and Beyond

In the fall of 2019, district staff initiated a strategic planning process to develop a new three to five-year plan for CPS with a review of current programs and services as well as the exploration of new areas to focus on in the years to come based upon feedback from the community, parents and staff. A number of surveys were developed and planning and visioning sessions were held to hear first-hand from our constituents about their experiences with and desires for programming and services in CPS to best meet the needs of all learners. The strategic planning process was curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, as district staff shifted their focus to the development and support of remote learning. The strategic planning committee will reconvene this summer to review where they left off this past spring and finalize draft plans for public input this fall with the reopening of schools.

Extended School Closure: Remote Learning

As has been referenced previously, this past year was truly like no other, what began as a regular school year ended with the statewide closure of schools in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially our staff worked to maintain remote contact with their students and provided them with enrichment and review activities as we geared up for the transition to full remote learning. Initially, we did not know if we would be out of our school buildings for a few weeks or the rest of the school year. As the weeks progressed and it became clear that we would not be going back to school for the remainder of the year, our staff received professional development and training on Google classroom and the Google suite of applications to enable them to initiate new learning content with their students. It was a difficult situation for all involved – students, parents, and staff. However, it was truly remarkable to see our community

come together to support one another throughout the school closure. From our school nutrition staff implementing a Grab-and-Go daily feeding program to support our families in need, to our building custodians maintaining our facilities in the event we were allowed to return to school, all of our staff stepped up to support our students needs, ensuring first and foremost their health, safety and wellbeing. The district made a considerable effort to increase regular communication with families at the district and school level throughout the extended school closure. I sincerely appreciate the cooperation and understanding of parents and students as our district transitioned from in-person schooling to remote learning. We will use our experiences to inform and better our practices moving forward.

Over this past year, we have accomplished much as we worked together. In addition to the developments already listed, we have taken steps to continue to rebuild both the school community's and the greater Chelmsford community's confidence in the school administration. I have worked closely with Town Manager Cohen and the members of his financial team to provide accurate and timely information on our budget to Chelmsford's boards. We will close the books on FY2020 with a positive fund balance, transferring any unexpended local budget appropriation to the circuit breaker revolving fund to help offset future unanticipated special education tuition costs, and we'll set aside remaining school choice funds as a reserve for School Committee use. Much work lies ahead, but I strongly feel we are continuing to move in the right direction. I am excited about our staff's past accomplishments in the district and look forward to a successful 2020/21 school year.