

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 19, 2021
Re: Chelmsford Public Schools: 2020/21 Year in Review

As I reflect on my sixth 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, especially considering the pandemic, 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.

The 2020/21 school year has been like no other in memory. On Friday March 13, 2020, all schools across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts closed for in-person learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Districts transitioned to remote learning in the spring of 2020, for what was originally anticipated to be several days or weeks, however, the weeks turned into months and the summer of 2020 was quickly upon us. Our students and staff did not return to our school buildings for in-person learning to end the 2019/20 school year; students and staff worked remotely to maintain routines, sustain relationships, and advance learning. Much of the summer of 2020 was spent reviewing advisories from state agencies on what “school” would look like in the fall of 2020, when students and staff returned to our buildings. Working groups comprised of parents and staff met throughout the summer to develop options for in-person, hybrid, and remote learning given community- and school-level health metrics and guidance from local and state agencies. The hard work and long hours spent planning for the 2020/21 school year resulted in several program options for our families, students and staff to select from as the 2020/21 school year began in September, 2020.

At the elementary, middle and high school levels of the district, Chelmsford offered a choice of hybrid (in-person/remote instruction) or full remote instruction to students. Families selected the option that best suited their child(ren) and family needs given the health situation presented by COVID-19. Throughout the school year, our district stressed the importance of adhering to public health recommendations, including mask wearing, practicing good hand hygiene, social distancing, and staying home when a student or staff member was experiencing COVID-19 related symptoms. Our staff has never worked harder than they did this year, it challenged and pushed us as educators in ways we have not previously been challenged or pushed. As we close the 2020/21 school year, I am thankful for the support we have received from our parent community and tremendous effort our staff placed on making the 2020/21 school year truly the best it could possibly be for the students of Chelmsford. As we bring the 2020/21 school year to a close, our COVID-19 numbers in the community remain on the decline, and within our schools remain incredibly low, due to the collective effort of our Chelmsford school communities.

I look forward to the 2021/22 school year and a return to more traditional “school” in September, 2021. This summer promises to be another busy one as we review and revise our practices and protocols to welcome all students back to full-time in-person learning in the fall. Following are some highlights of our collective work this year:

FY2020 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, 2020. 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.

FY2021 Budget Administration

School Committee members received regular reports on the district’s finances throughout FY2021, including the local operating budget, grant funds, and revolving funds. After reviewing the FY2021 budget, I am pleased to report the district has continued to make 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 FY2021, the district can:

- reserve approximately \$ 2.3 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 six 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 as no reserve fund balance was available).

- carry over approximately \$ 1.3 million 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. A portion of these funds will be allocated to a capital improvement project in FY2022.
- set aside approximately \$ 2 million in school choice funds as a reserve for future spending by the School Committee on educational programs and services to augment current program offerings in the schools, or a contingency in the event of an unanticipated budget shortfall. School choice funds are utilized annually to support the 1:1 Chromebook initiative.

FY2022 Budget Presentation and Review

In February, the administration presented the FY2022 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 FY2022 budget, including normal step and lane increases, a decrease in special education tuition costs, and funding to support a tutoring support service model at the elementary and middle school levels to augment grant funding that supports interventionist positions providing small group, Tier II, instruction to students identified in need of targeted academic interventions and academic supports. 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 revised recommended budget increase of \$3.3 million, \$ 61.6 million to \$ 65 million, to support the Chelmsford Public Schools.

At the June 17, 2021 town meeting, representatives once again asked thoughtful questions, received straightforward answers, and approved (unanimously) the FY2022 revised funding request of \$65 million to support CPS.

Chapter 70 and Legislative Funding Analysis

The district contracted with Mr. Roger Hatch, retired MA DESE school finance administrator, to revise and update 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 – considering the enacted legislation at the state level.

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 best instructional practices. Funding to launch the 1:1 Chromebook initiative was approved and the CPS 1:1 Chromebook initiative launched in FY2020.

Funding for the third year of implementation of the 1:1 Chromebook initiative is incorporated in the FY2022 budget to provide all incoming 5th grade students at McCarthy and Parker Middle Schools and 9th grade students at Chelmsford High School with a district-provided computer (Chromebook) for use at home and in school. At the start of the 2021/22 school year, all grade 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11 students will be provided with a district issued computer for use at home and in school.

Return-to-School Planning

Throughout the summer and fall of 2020, committee members were updated on trends in student enrollment, learning model selection (hybrid or remote), class size and teacher assignments, student transportation modifications for riders and eligibility, updated cleaning and sanitization protocols, and food service and school nutrition program modifications due to COVID. As the school year progressed, committee members received regular updates on student transitions between learning models, modifications to extracurricular activities, such as athletics and clubs, and the eventual return to full-time in-person learning of elementary school students on April 5, 2021, middle school students on April 28, 2021, and high school students on May 3, 2021. The district concluded the school year with all students having the ability to attend full-time in-person learning at all levels.

COVID Health and Safety Practices and Protocols

Throughout the school year, district administrators worked closely with community and town partners, including the Chelmsford Board of Health, to use community level COVID data to guide learning model decision making and to review and refine COVID protocols for positive case management and the identification of close contacts. Further, the district refined its public communication of COVID cases within the Chelmsford Public

School community to include daily notification of positive COVID cases within each school and a weekly COVID dashboard notification of positive cases within the district.

In March, the district implemented a voluntary COVID pool testing program, providing weekly on-site COVID tests, free of charge, to any student or staff member that consented to be part of the pool testing initiative. From the start of the program in March, through its conclusion in June, a total of 11,433 tests were administered, yielding a total of five (5) positive tests, a .04% positivity rate. This measure, along with enhancements to each schools HVAC system, the procurement and use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and social distancing measures (proper hand hygiene, spacing, etc.) were implemented to provide for the health, safety and well-being of our students and staff.

As K-12 public school staff became eligible to receive the COVID vaccine in March, district and school administrators encouraged and worked to coordinate appointments for staff to receive the vaccine. By the return to full-time in-person learning in April, over 700 staff in the district had received the COVID vaccine. Many more have since done so. Further, when vaccine eligibility was expanded to include individuals 12 years of age and older, the district partnered with a local pharmacy to provide free, COVID vaccine doses on-site at Chelmsford High School for interested individuals. We will continue to encourage and assist interested students and staff to receive the COVID vaccine as a measure to allow our schools to return to more traditional, pre-pandemic school operation.

CPS Website Redesign

A goal of the school committee and administration was achieved this spring, when on May 1, a new website launched to improve communication with all district stakeholders as it pertains to general announcements, school and district achievements, and matters of informational importance. The district engaged the services of a firm to build a new website for CPS to include district and individual school pages. Further enhancements to the website will be implemented this summer and fall as individuals, departments and schools create content to keep parents and students informed of happenings in the district.

Over this past year, we have accomplished much as we worked together. In addition to the aforementioned pandemic related actions of the past year, we continued to administer and manage the day-to-day operations of the school district, approved capital plans for FY2022, submitted an application for MSBA funding consideration of a future long-term school building project, developed new programming, such as the Innovation Pathways Program at Chelmsford High School, and began a review of diversity, equity and inclusiveness practices in our school system.

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 FY2021 with a positive fund balance and we will 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 this past year and look forward to a successful 2021/22 school year.