

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 16, 2022
Re: Chelmsford Public Schools: 2021/22 Year in Review

As I reflect on my seventh 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 displayed by our teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and support staff.

After the 2020/21 school year with a combination of in-person and hybrid learning, we all hoped for a return to more normalcy in 2021/22. Much like the summer of 2020, the summer of 2021 was spent reviewing advisories from state agencies on what "school" would look like when students and staff returned to the buildings in the fall of 2021. While remote learning was not available in 2021/22, considerable effort and regulations governed the wearing of masks in and around schools, the development of protocols for COVID-19 positive students and staff, and identification of close contacts of COVID-19 positive individuals. Throughout the school year, our district stressed the importance of adhering to public health recommendations, practicing good hand hygiene, social distancing, and staying home when a student or staff member was experiencing COVID-19 related symptoms. We began the school year with a masking requirement for all students and staff, eventually transitioning to mask-optional following the February school vacation week in 2022. 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 2021/22 school year, I am thankful for the support we have received from our parent community and tremendous effort our staff placed on making the 2021/22 school year truly the best it could possibly be for the students of Chelmsford. As we bring the 2021/22 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 2022/23 school year and a return to more traditional “school” in September, 2022. This summer promises to be another busy one as we review and revise our practices and protocols from the last two years and prepare for a more normal return to school in the fall. Following are some highlights of our collective work this year:

FY2021 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, 2021. 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.

FY2022 Budget Administration

School Committee members received regular reports on the district’s finances throughout FY2022, including the local operating budget, grant funds, and revolving funds. After reviewing the FY2022 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 FY2022, the district can:

- reserve approximately \$ 2.5 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, seven 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).
- reserve \$ 750,000 in a new special education reserve fund in accordance with MGL Ch. 40 § 13E to offset unanticipated/unfunded special education student tuition and/or transportation costs in future fiscal years.
- carry over approximately \$ 2.9 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 has been allocated to an FY2022 capital improvement project.

- set aside approximately \$ 2.3 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 student Chromebook initiative.

FY2023 Budget Presentation and Review

In February, the administration presented the FY2023 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 FY2023 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 recommended budget increase of \$2.5 million, \$ 65 million to \$ 67.5 million, to support the Chelmsford Public Schools.

At the April 25, 2022 town meeting, representatives once again asked thoughtful questions, received straightforward answers, and approved (near unanimously: 131 - 1) the FY2023 funding request of \$67.5 million to support CPS.

Focus on Students and Staff: Mental Health Care and Counseling

The district has long partnered with families and staff to provide counseling and mental health services through INTERFACE referral service, a program of William James College. As the demand for mental health services increased post-pandemic, INTERFACE was experiencing a longer than usual response time matching students and staff with outside counseling services. In January, the district initiated a new partnership with Care Solace, a company serving K-12 school districts to match students and staff with verified, local service providers in a matter of days, not weeks or months, when mental health services are requested. This 24/7/365 day support includes nights, weekends, holidays and school breaks. The service is anonymous, provides culturally and gender appropriate care, is multilingual (in 200+ languages), and connects students and staff with mental health care and counseling services regardless of insurance.

Focus on Students and Staff: Social Emotional Learning and Supports

The districts' investment in social emotional programming and supports leading up to, and during the pandemic was instrumental in maintaining momentum on district initiatives and providing a safe and support school community for students and staff. Investments in elementary, middle and high school social emotional curricula (Second Step and Character Strong) coupled with additional school and district counselors, psychologists and social workers were necessary and timely given the demands the pandemic placed on students and staff. The foresight and commitment to providing this additional layer of SEL services, supports and staff positively impacted our school communities as we returned to full-time in-person learning in 2021/22.

Focus on Students: Academics as we Return to Full-Time In-Learning

The district completed and extensive literacy curriculum review and adoption process in grades PreK-6 that provides a robust set of materials and tools to address the needs of all learners and provides a strong literacy education for the students of Chelmsford. At the beginning of the pandemic, our elementary schools completed the curriculum adoption process after comparing reading and phonics programs to select a final product for the district. The adoption expanded to grades 5 and 6 at the middle school level in the 2021/22 school year. Currently, our PreK-3 teachers use [Foundations](#) by Wilson Learning for direct phonics instruction and [Heggerty](#) by Literacy Resources for direct phonological awareness instruction. We adopted the [Fountas and Pinnell Classroom](#) through Heinemann Publishing as the core reading program PreK-6. This year, the adoption process was completed with grade 3 implementing a full year with *Foundations* and grades 5 and 6 implementing a full year with the *Fountas and Pinnell Classroom* reading program. Professional development has been ongoing for all grade levels with Wilson Learning for *Foundations* and Lesley University for *Fountas and Pinnell Classroom*. We will continue with professional development in all grades for the 2022/23 school year and incorporate a combination of in-class coaching and professional development on half days to continue to support educators with the full literacy curriculum implementation.

To further support our primary curriculum, the district contracted with [Paper Learning](#) during the 2021/22 school year to provide 24/7 unlimited, on-demand live tutoring with trained instructors in all subject areas for students in grades 5-12. This partnership will continue in the 2022/23 school year to assist students as they make the final transition back to in-person learning post-pandemic. Additionally, the district will continue supporting other academic digital learning tools such as iReady, IXL, Lexia Reading, Raz-Kids, Brain Pop, Edgenuity, Overdrive, and Google G Suite to both identify students' academic needs and provide support beyond the general curriculum in the classroom.

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 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 a weekly COVID dashboard notification of positive student and staff cases within the district.

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. Throughout the 2021/22 school year, a total of 40,145 tests were administered, yielding a total of 283 positive tests, a 0.7% 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.

In February, the district implemented a voluntary at-home rapid antigen COVID test kit program, providing weekly COVID test kits, free of charge, to any student or staff member that consented to be part of the at-home rapid antigen COVID test kit program. Throughout the winter and spring months, a total of 3,237 students and staff registered and received weekly at-home rapid antigen COVID test kits and participated in the program.

As K-12 public school staff became eligible to receive the COVID vaccine in March of 2021, district and school administrators encouraged and worked to coordinate appointments for staff to receive the vaccine. Further, when vaccine eligibility was expanded to include school-age children, the district partnered with a local pharmacy to provide free, COVID vaccine doses on-site 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. We are encouraged by the high level of student and staff vaccination rates compared to surrounding districts.

Diversity and Equity Professional Development

The Chelmsford Public Schools is committed to providing professional development for our school community in the areas of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). As a result, we contracted with the Initiatives for Developing Equity and Achievement (IDEAS) through the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS) to provided professional learning opportunities that support equity and success for all. With the help of a small sub-committee made up of administration and union leadership, we developed a plan for the 2021/22 school year and designated dates for the school committee, administration, and staff through our professional development days to begin the work around DEI at all levels. We had a very successful year working with

IDEAS and look forward to continuing building our capacity on the topic of DEI in future years.

Districtwide Facilities Master Plan & Short/Long Term Facilities Visioning

In July, the school committee authorized the issuance of an RFP to engage the services of a firm to review the status of and provide updates to our current 10-Year Capital Plan, our MSBA priority project and application for long-term MSBA funding consideration, and to consider short-term program and/or facility enhancements and realignments while our long-term capital project is pending. Dore & Whittier Architects, the author of the original districtwide master plan, was selected to return, update the short- and long-term capital plans, and host community visioning sessions to reassess and recommend a MSBA priority project. Dore & Whittier provided updates to the school committee throughout the fall and winter months. After careful consideration and much discussion, the school committee revised the MSBA priority project (from Chelmsford High School to Parker Middle School) and voted in April to advance Parker Middle School as the MSBA priority project in hopes of building a new middle school in Chelmsford in the years to come. Dore and Whittier also identified a potential short-term facilities enhancement and realignment of the middle school grade levels while our long-term capital project is pending. The potential for merging the McCarthy and Parker Middle School populations and creating a separate grade 5/6 middle school (Parker) and separate grade 7/8 middle school (McCarthy) was identified as a short-term measure to provide more equitable middle school programming in town.

Districtwide Strategic Planning

In November, the district contracted with District Management Group (DMGroup) to develop a multi-year strategic plan for the Chelmsford Public Schools. DMGroup worked with district administrators and a steering committee to assess our current performance and needs, and to clearly articulate priority areas to be the focus of our improvement efforts in the coming years to continue to advance education in Chelmsford. DMGroup hosted staff and community sessions to gather input for the plan and presented updates to the steering committee and school committee throughout the process. In June, a draft strategic plan was presented and final feedback was sought on the identified priority areas. The final strategic plan will guide our work in the Chelmsford Public Schools over the next 5-years: 2022/23 – 2026/27.

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 grounded 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 fourth year of implementation of the 1:1 Chromebook initiative is incorporated in the FY2023 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 2022/23 school year, all grade 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 students will be provided with a district issued computer for use at home and in school.

Ratification of the Chelmsford School Administrators' Association Contract

On March 15, 2022, the School Committee ratified a three-year contract with the Chelmsford School Administrators' Association bargaining unit covering the period from July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2025.

Ratification of the Chelmsford Teachers and Nurses Contract

On June 29, 2022, the School Committee ratified a three-year contract with the Chelmsford Teachers and Nurses bargaining unit covering the period from July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2025.

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 FY2023, 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 FY2022 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 staffs' accomplishments in the district this past year and look forward to a successful 2022/23 school year.