

Budget Subcommittee Report for the 02/24/21 Regular School Committee Meeting

At the 02/10/21 Budget Subcommittee meeting, Department Heads presented their reflections on this year (hybrid) and considerations for the next (FY22), using questions designed by subcommittee members to assess areas of need, concern or improvement for sake of planning. The original intent was budget-related, however the content shared was also relevant to the unique considerations for planning school structures impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While every Department Head had unique feedback, several common themes emerged relevant to SC deliberations. These themes are summarized here by category*:

Technology: Many applications have been very successful and will continue to be used in the future as curriculum has now been created around them. Some apps that have been successfully implemented include: jamboard, flipgrid, google assignments, edpuzzle, quizlet, music making apps, science simulating apps, and we-video, plus breakout rooms within BB. These apps are allowing students to talk, communicate, and share even if it is asynchronous. Everyone agreed that the I.T./Digital Learning team has built strong partnerships with staff and worked hard to provide training on new tools and tech support as quickly as possible to all who need it. Staff also loved their two monitor setup that was new this year as it made teaching in hybrid easier as they could see material and students at the same time.

However, there are still some common concerns focused on technology use. We have students and staff that have different levels of familiarity and skill. Teachers also discussed process and cost concerns surrounding software purchases, sustaining subscription fees and compatibility with existing tools.

Finally, while the early support, Professional Development (PD) and training were very beneficial at the beginning of the year, as the year has progressed it is clear that more opportunities for further training and PD are necessary. There is currently not enough time for teachers to get additional support that will carry through to the next phase of learning, or for teachers to discuss best practices. For example, teachers were provided with iPads to assist with instruction, but they came in after the start of classes and there has not been time to provide training on the many ways that these can be used (ex: live streaming, projecting on the whiteboard, etc.). Some of the more “tech savvy” teachers have figured out how to use them in creative ways, but lack shared planning time to share best practices with colleagues.

Time/PD/PLCs: Finding time is a big challenge for teachers. While Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) continue to meet in the Middle School, the High School is finding this very challenging. This is leading to less conversation between teachers, fewer opportunities to share best practices, and feelings of isolation as teachers often spend entire days in their classrooms with the door closed. There is also little time for shared PD.

Blackboard: Blackboard continues to be a topic of discussion as it has throughout the year. The two primary areas of concern focus on the video conferencing tool which limits the number of students that can be viewed and the way “Blackboard Classrooms” are organized.

The good news is that our IT department has been working closely with blackboard to resolve the video conferencing issue and we will be the only high school, along with many universities, to pilot a better gallery view, which will hopefully improve user experience.

The way blackboard is used by staff impacts students who expect blackboard classrooms to be organized the same way for every class, but different teachers find it intuitive to organize their blackboard classroom in different ways (as they might with physical class spaces). Moving forward it is recommended that additional training focus more on the user experience for students. This will require focus on workflow and improving consistency within Blackboard.

Relationships: It was clear from feedback that there is a great deal of concern about the loss of relationships during remote and hybrid learning. These relationships, whether they are teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, or student-to-student are what build the heart of the school. Staff are concerned about the degree of isolation their students are experiencing. While most teachers are actively checking in with students, that “check-in” might still go unnoticed by the student because of the nature of the contact. It’s also very hard to connect with students who aren’t engaging online. Teachers are also missing the opportunity to check in with each other. Most meetings are conducted online, so students and staff alike are spending the majority of their time on screens, which can be debilitating. Many expressed that relationship building will be more critical during a return to school than trying to cover the curriculum gaps that may exist.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Executive Function (EF): The current style of teaching has shined a light on the challenges of EF for all students. While staff have known that EF concerns existed for many students, they didn’t know how much they would be exacerbated when the students are left to work more independently from home. As for SEL, it represents work that is both proactive and preventative. There needs to be more emphasis on SEL moving forward. We need to prioritize how students are doing emotionally.

Class sizes: Concern over larger class sizes was a common refrain. Teachers expect that due to many of the concerns (lost relationships, need for SEL, coordinating and adjusting curriculum) that smaller class sizes will be needed. This will allow more direct impact for students. Relationships and connections are at the core of our school, and while there are studies that say class sizes make no difference when evaluating student learning and teacher instructional practices, these studies do not take into account the difference in student relationships and the ability of teachers to get to know their students. The larger the class size, the more challenging this becomes. Test scores and instruction may be about the same with larger class sizes, but in smaller classes teachers get to know their students, and when teachers get to know their students, students can be more successful.

Hybrid Schedule: The hybrid schedule as it is is not ideal; it is overwhelming for both staff and students. Teachers feel they are just trying to get from one day to the next because of the sheer volume of work necessary to prep and teach every day. Opportunities for teachers and department heads to share feedback on what is/isn’t working with the schedule are welcome.

When asked about whether changes make sense now or whether it is better to use this information to plan for September, Dept. Heads answered that they are more focused on planning for September. They noted that people are in their groove now and it would be disruptive to change things now. They prefer to apply the knowledge and perspective from this experience and use the needed time to begin developing contingency plans for the fall, which is not too far away in terms of planning. One point of feedback for the near term was from students reporting that they like the WIN block but wish it was a static block. Other take-aways were that having the MS and HS schedules aligned was “like magic,” that a later start time for students is a good thing, and that the rotating schedule was missed.

Hybrid Teaching: While teachers everywhere are making the best of a bad situation, it is clear that teaching in a hybrid model where some students are in person and some students are remote is not ideal. It can be done, but it is very difficult to do well. Several factors contribute to this problem including students requiring more help than anticipated and reduced in person communication. Additionally, students aren't incentivized to be in the building when teachers are forced to teach to the screen whether students are in person or at home. We need to focus on what we can do to make the learning experience better for kids. No specific solutions were suggested at this time.

One of our longest serving department heads, Denise Tenanty shared her thoughts on teaching a full load of classes (five classes every day) in the hybrid model first semester: "I've been teaching for more than 40 years and have never spent as much time preparing for classes and feeling that they were inadequate as I do now." She noted that at times she would see a total of 8 students in person in the course of a day as opposed to 115, so the focus had to be on all the students who were not in the classroom. "I don't have the answer but I just know how very difficult it is for teachers."

During discussion, the question was raised whether more students attending in person during hybrid would result in a shift or adjustment to the teaching methodology. There was no clear answer because it's hard to envision the ways this might impact teachers.

Plans for next phase(s) of learning models and budget considerations (all disciplines):

Many department heads suggested that the focus in Sept should be on rebuilding relationships and a love for learning and a community of learners before we get into the nuts and bolts of content. In that regard we need bigger discussions with all stakeholders. For example, there will need to be some discussion about honors and CP courses and where students belong. We don't see these as gaps, but we need to allow students to shift to the course that will be most appropriate for them after this school year, and the curriculums will need to be adjusted as well.

We also need to take the time now to come up with a number of contingency plans for "what if" situations so that we can build schedules that meet various needs. One consistent point, based on this year's experience, was that teachers felt they could teach well in person or teach well on a remote platform, but that nobody seems to have figured out how to simultaneously do both well. Many department heads expressed the notion that it is better to have three to four possible plans and only need one than to have one that doesn't meet the situation.

Z.Bhujju noted that the full Leadership Team is currently planning for the fall, and the SC anticipates regular updates as ideas take form - with contingency plans and different scenarios looking ahead.

***Department-specific core subject commentary is not included in this report, but will be reflected in the 2/10/210 meeting minutes.**