



To: Harvard School Committee
From: Linda G. Dwight, Superintendent of Schools
Abigail Besse, School Committee Chair
Mandy Ostaszewski, Director of Finance and Operations
Date: February 14, 2025
Subject: **Requested Information for Finance Committee**

On Tuesday, February 10, 2025, we were asked to provide additional information regarding the following:

- Medicaid Reimbursement
- Quantifiable Savings from Hiring a Special Education Teacher for an SEL Program; Can current staff cover the SEL program?
- Other Options for Special Education Transportation and the current Circuit Breaker Reimbursement Rate
- Can the Literacy Program Materials be Postponed?

Additionally, we were asked to provide a prioritized list of new items for the budget override and the number for level service.

Medicaid Reimbursement:

See the attached answer to #8 from the [Q & A](#) submitted on January 7, 2025. There is no further update at this time.

Special Education Hire:

The request for a special education teacher, budgeted at \$75,000 was originally presented for the FY25 budget. The additional special education teacher would be a proactive addition as the person would create an SEL program that provides a continuum of in-district services to support students with social/emotional needs. As noted below, our highest percentage of students in OOD placements are those with identified emotional disabilities. Please see the details in this [memo](#) submitted with the budget spreadsheet.

This SEL program, staffed by a special education teacher, is anticipated to prevent some of the out-of-district costs associated with students' tuition to SEL programs in private or collaborative settings. In FY25, for just those students who are identified with emotional disabilities, the District is anticipated to spend approximately \$903,000. The average tuition for those students is approximately \$85,000 with Circuit Breaker

covering 75% of costs above the threshold (the threshold being \$52,419 for FY25). Likewise, the average projected transportation cost is approximately \$23,000 per student with 44% reimbursed through Circuit Breaker. This means that the average net cost per student for the District would be approximately \$73,000.

Using these calculations, if we can support just two students in their home district rather than needing to refer to an out-of-district placement, we would save approximately \$147,000 which more than covers the cost of the teacher and their benefits (if they elect to take them).

Current faculty in the Special Education department have full caseloads, so therefore an additional teacher would be needed to create this SEL program.

Special Education Transportation:

We currently contract with Dee Bus and CASE Collaborative as our primary providers for transportation of our students to special education private and collaborative schools. We have at times needed to contract with smaller, private companies due to lack of availability from our primary providers. This service is not bid out, as it is student-specific. The distance varies from 10 to 35 miles and this varies every year based on new and changing placements. Some students require wheelchair vans and some students require nursing or 1:1 supervision during the transport. Transportation is part of a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and therefore a binding, legal obligation to fully support the needs of our students. The rising cost of transportation is a state-wide issue as detailed in the articles linked below.

We have considered purchasing or leasing vans ourselves and hiring drivers, but with 24 students attending out-of-district placements, we would require a fleet of vans and drivers to provide all of our transportation needs. This option would be cost-prohibitive due to the required driver training, insurance, liability, and regulations. We would also be adding employees with benefits and retirement costs.

Transportation is reimbursed at a Circuit Breaker rate of 44%. This reimbursement does not come back to the school district until the following year. We have the FY26 budget built with an offset of \$1,000,000 from Circuit Breaker but this reliance depends on us receiving state funds to that amount from the current school year. We do our best to predict this number a year before it is known.

[Special education is becoming more expensive for schools. That's one reason why they can't pay educators more. - The Boston Globe](#)

[Facing Skyrocketing Special Ed. Costs, Schools Look to Keep More Students in Belmont](#)

[Walpole school budget faces \\$1.3M gap amid rising special education costs](#)

[United for our Future letter to the Governor & Legislature](#)

Literacy Program Purchase:

The Literacy Task Force has worked over the past two years to support the transition to a high-quality, research-based literacy program K-5, as outlined in the District Improvement Plan and the HES Improvement Plan. Continuous curriculum updates are essential to maintaining relevance and effectiveness, and this purchase is a level-service investment.

The purchase of materials is a critical need and remains a top priority for district leaders and the school committee. On December 2, 2025, the Assistant Superintendent presented the Task Force's findings and recommendations to the School Committee. ([Presentation](#) and [SC Meeting link](#) - starting at 7 min.)

In addition to having high-quality instructional materials for our students, it is equally important to support staff with high-quality professional development. Our district's core values, strategic plan, and school improvement plans emphasize the need to support all students, including historically underserved groups. Part of our commitment is to provide a sense of belonging and voice to our students. Curriculum (particularly EL) is an avenue to this goal. A highly engaging curriculum is not only a goal, but high-quality instructional materials allow us to compete for competitive grants. More information can be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/impd/>

Professional development to support this transition has already begun, with the \$13,000 funding generously provided by the PTO and the Harvard Schools Trust.

Level Funding and Level Service vs Budget Submitted

Level Funded	Level Service	Submitted Budget
\$15,735,250 \$15,638,921 (below level funded)	\$16,387,033 (\$16,594,033 - \$207,000 of additional requests; see below)	\$16,594,033

Prioritized List of additional requests (those not required or contractual):

1. Literacy Materials; \$77,000
2. Special Education Teacher; \$75,000
3. COTA (Certified Occupational Therapist Assistant); \$30,000
4. Technology Support (Additional Hours for Current Employee); \$25,000

Total Cost for all additional requests = \$207,000

Impact:

The impact of no override would be extremely detrimental to the school district. We would have to cut \$748,112 and eliminate the additional requests; some of which are necessary to provide level service to our students. As detailed in our budget memo, the salaries of our current employees will increase by \$502,105 by contractual obligation (2.5% COLA for faculty and 2.75% COLA for staff). This sum does not consider the increase in the cost of utilities, bussing, tuition, and services. Since budgets have already been reduced (supplies and materials, Out-of-District Coordinator, lunch/recess aides), the additional reductions would need to come from salaries. At an average salary of \$60,000 (professional staff, non-professional staff, administrative) we would need to cut 11 ½ positions.