

The FAQs on PORTSMOUTH SCHOOLS

What is being asked for and what is being provided?

If you are receiving this FAQ you are attending the Public Meeting on the FY2011 Town Provisional Budget. Tonight public comment will be asked for regarding the budget. There will be no votes or decisions made tonight, just the residents voicing favor or concern regarding the budget. The Town Council will vote the final budget on July 26th at 7:00 in Town Council Chambers, Portsmouth Town Hall. There may be an additional meeting for Council debate prior to the 26th.

The School Committee presented the Town Council with a \$36,643,021 budget and has not voted to change that request. That request asks for a 2.51% increase in funding from FY2010. The Town Council voted to "level fund" the Schools in their Preliminary Budget (a \$1.2 Million Cut); and, subsequently split that figure, approving a Provisional Budget for the Schools of \$36,023,601. This represents a 0.78% increase. The Provisional Budget requires the Town to exceed the "Tax Cap" (Senate Bill 3050 Tax Levy Cap). There was a loophole at the time of the vote which allowed a simple majority to approve to exceed the cap that no longer exists. Therefore, as we sit tonight and with no expectation that 6 of 7 councilors will vote to exceed the cap, the Schools face over \$1 million in cuts from their proposed budget.

The School Committee, through its Finance Sub-Committee, has offered for discussion a \$36,293,021 budget or a \$350,000 cut from their requested budget. This would represent a 1.5% increase. That is believed to be the "bottom line" for the School Department.

Clearly a \$1+ million dollar cut to the School's budget is devastating, as all sports, music, extracurricular, some arts, theater, no-step increases, no pay increases... don't even total \$800,000. Were the Town Council to maintain their super majority opinion against exceeding the "Cap", the Schools are left two options: the Courts or a Referendum Election in September. Was the Town Council willing to accept the Schools 1.5% increase that would mean we would exceed the S3050 levy cap of 4.5% by roughly \$1 million; for the average home (\$350,000) that would equate to a property tax increase of about \$100, slightly more than \$8 per month.

How efficient are we?

The Portsmouth School System has consistently been one of the most efficient school systems in Rhode Island, and the facts consistently prove that out. We have for the past decade attacked ourselves within Town when our argument should be the parity of per pupil spending. In fact, our efficiency had a great deal to do with our loss in State Education Aid beginning in FY2012. To begin let me state the facts: (Source: RIPEC - *RESULTS Education in Rhode Island 2010*)

- **Portsmouth is 33rd of 36 Districts in Expenditures per Pupil**
- **Portsmouth is tied for last in General Instruction Expenditures per Pupil**
- **Portsmouth spends \$11,955 per pupil while the Suburban Average is \$14,122 per Pupil**
- **Our oft mentioned “Region Partners” Middletown & Newport spend \$15,102 and \$18,450 respectively per Pupil.**
- **76% of the cost of Education in Portsmouth is paid for by Local Taxes, compared to 61.5% in Middletown and 59.5% in Newport.**
- **Middletown (a smaller District) received \$9.5 million vs. Portsmouth’s \$5.9 million in comparable State Education Aid (FY2008). And, Portsmouth will lose \$2.070 million of that aid beginning with a \$207,000 cut in FY2011.**
- **Barrington, who joins us in the top three of efficiency, will actually receive more in the new State funding formula. Why, because Barrington taxpayers have always supported their schools, covering 90% of the cost of education with local taxes.**

Our debate this budget season has been focused on the unions, cost cutting, layoffs, and closing Elmhurst. Have we as a community stepped back and taken the time to understand our budget and what incredible things have been realized for so little all these years? Our labor costs are included in the RIPEC study; and, while changes are being negotiated, let’s not vilify our teachers or their right to make a living. Starting teachers are paid in the high \$30K and top at Step 10 at \$71K, which is not an unreasonable range. It is easy to take facts out of context and cherry pick an anomaly - ex: Step 8 to Step 9 Increase. Let’s understand the facts and reasonable plot a prudent course for Portsmouth education.

Clearly, the facts show that Portsmouth is one of the most efficient Districts in Rhode Island, but instead of celebrating that accomplishment we continue to ask for more. While Barrington will receive greater State Education Aid next year, Portsmouth will lose based on our ability to pay more from local taxes. So our frugality has actually come home to roost.

Why is this Year Important?

Rhode Island is clearly going a challenging fiscal period and to help balance its budget the State cut State Education Aid and State Aid for Cities and Towns. This has placed a terrible burden on local Council’s to balance this loss in revenue. This comes just a few years after passage of Senate Bill 3050. Under S3050, Portsmouth’s town tax levy increase is capped at 5.5 % to 4.0% by FY 2013

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(FY2011-4.5%). The bill also established a cap on the budget adopted and presented by any School Committee at 105.25%, beginning in FY2008, of the previous year's allocation. The cap would be reduced to 104% by FY2012. BTW: the same year we will begin to lose \$207,000 in State Education Aid per year for ten years.

Fighting for proper funding in FY2011 is critical to maintain the integrity of Portsmouth's education system. But, realizing that no one is at fault: the Town Council, the School Committee, Town Administrators; but, that the State is at fault, that we have a funding crises, that we need to protect our basic services; **we need to exceed the Cap for FY2011**. Most importantly, we have the right to exceed the cap by law due to the loss of non-property tax income: State Aid. That right may not be as clear in future years when we face cuts from the School Aid Funding Formula.

Learn more at: www.sosportsmouth.com