

Opposition grows to Boston Public Schools budget cuts

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Hundreds of Boston Public Schools parents, students and teachers packed the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Bolling Municipal Building in Roxbury last Wednesday to protest planned cuts to the 2016-2017 schools budget. Scores of people at the standing-room-only hearing signed up to address BPS Superintendent Tommy Chang and members of the Boston School Committee.

Protests at the public hearing followed a walkout of thousands of BPS middle and high school students earlier this month to protest proposed cuts to city high schools that threatened teaching positions, librarian jobs, extracurricular activities, music, arts and other programs.

After the March 9 student walkout, Mayor Marty Walsh, a Democrat, backtracked on the high school cuts and said funding for high schools would be restored to current-year levels. But other programs and services are now on the chopping block. The new version of the budget released by Superintendent Chang estimates that about \$32 million in savings are needed district-wide to balance the budget.

BPS calculates its annual budget on a “weighted student funding” model, which allocates funds to students rather than to schools or programs. Students’ values are based on grade level, educational needs and learning challenges. The district had originally planned to give high schools less money for each student.

The original budget proposed to allocate \$11 million to long-term investments, including developing dual language programs and the “Excellence for All” pilot program to expand access to more challenging course work to fourth graders. Chang now proposes to reallocate \$6 million from these long-term investments to high school students.

The district’s five public early childhood education and learning centers (EECs/ELCs), which enroll children as young as three years old, are facing cuts of \$1.3 million next school year. The superintendent’s new budget notes

that there will be “reductions in services and supports offered throughout the day,” although he claims that hours at the EECs/ELCs will remain the same.

Parents of young children spoke passionately at the hearing about the early learning centers, addressing their concerns over proposed cuts to Chang and Boston School Committee members. Many were concerned that “surround care,” which provides before- and after-school care for children, is under threat.

Sahar Abdul-Adl’s son Imran attends the Haynes EEC. “I chose Haynes EEC because it was an EEC close to my home,” she said. “I did not want my son’s first time entering school for him to be lost amongst the older and bigger kids. At five years old he is a bigger kid.”

Boston’s nationally recognized early learning centers offer before- and after-school care from 7:30 a.m. to 4:35 p.m., for free, although wait lists can be long for these popular programs.

Abdul-Adl said, “Haynes is a loving, caring environment, from day one that has not only welcomed my son but my family. Without the after-school surround-care I would not be able to continue my studies in the biotech field. My husband works evenings so he will not be able to pick up my son from school. And next year I will have two children at the Haynes EEC.”

She said that she cannot afford private after-school care and does not qualify for vouchers.

“These budget cuts leave me stuck between furthering my education so that I can be able to enter the workforce and providing a decent quality of education for my children.”

Nicola Hill, a parent from the West Zone ELC, reminded the committee that Mayor Walsh had pledged that childhood education and extended learning time would be one of his office’s priorities. “The EECs and ELCs have been doing both of these things: education and extended learning,” she said. “Trained professionals

know that reaching children at an early age teaches them to be successful and that is not something that anyone here would dispute.”

She added, “The president of the Boston Teachers Union commented that extended learning time was an excellent way to increase participation in the underserved subject areas: art, music, drama. I am sure there are many children who would not have access to these enrichment activities were it not for the early learning opportunities provided.”

Hill said these valuable programs should be expanded, and not cut: “The very schools that are implementing this program successfully right now are the early learning centers that are facing the largest cuts in this very last-minute budget proposal.”

Despite Walsh’s restoration of the cuts to the high school budget, many high school students attended the meeting to express their opposition to the district-wide cutbacks.

Nathaniel Coronado is a freshman at Boston Latin Academy. BLA, formerly Girls’ Latin School, was founded in 1877 as the first college preparatory high school for girls in the US. Now co-educational, it is part of the BPS system.

Nathaniel told the hearing, “I testified at English High School last week and I came back to really emphasize that the current proposed budget cuts are unacceptable. Yes, since Monday the high schools were able to get back some money, but it isn’t enough.”

He was opposed to efforts to pit one section of students against another, saying, “All Boston schools need to be fully funded in order for there to be a functioning learning environment for all of the students. Without the proper funding for the necessary programs and beneficial extracurriculars, my education, my classmates’ education and the education of all future BPS students are seriously undermined.”

Sera Tapia, also a BLA freshman, spoke about money being siphoned off from the public school district to charter schools. Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker, a Republican, is a big proponent of charters and the state has consistently fallen short on reimbursements to BPS for charter seats. This past year, state reimbursements covered less than half what was owed, leaving the district with an \$18.6 million deficit.

Sera said she had previously attended a charter school, “But not all schools are as privileged, especially BPS schools as a whole. So much money is going into charter schools, they’re building more and more, and that is

taking away funds from elementary and middle schools to be placed on a solid foundation.”

Sera also said that many schools did not have the type of support programs for students like the ones at Boston Latin. The new budget also includes less money to support students with autism and those who are emotionally impaired. “With this new budget many students won’t have that support,” she said, “So I ask: Would you take candy away from these kids? So don’t take away their education.”

Fania Joseph is a sophomore at the Boston Community Leadership Academy, a pilot high school in the BPS system. She said, “Several high schools and many more elementary and middle schools are facing tremendous budget cuts. What you have to realize is that 70 percent of BPS schools are not a high school.”

She said that the mayor’s rescinding of the high school cuts did not solve the greater problem. “The mayor has not given us new funding,” she said. “They are just taking money from elementary schools and giving it to high schools; robbing Peter to pay Paul. It just delays the cuts.”

As with the public hearings on raising MBTA transit fares, such meetings—which are required by law—are designed to allow city and state residents to let off steam as public officials prepare their austerity agendas.

Closing the meeting, Chang addressed the crowd in patronizing fashion. “I’m moved by the power of the student voice here in Boston,” he said. “I really do appreciate the civic engagement of our young people, who will be the future.”

The Boston School Committee has every intention of moving forward with the cuts, despite the outcry from parents and students. They will vote on the 2016-2017 budget Wednesday night, and more protests are expected.



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