

UPDATED: Montclair Board of School Estimate Meeting: Lots of Talk, No Decision

Updated with a public comment correction.

Monday night's Montclair School District's latest budget meeting, held by the Board of School Estimate, brought March out like a lion.

The Montclair Board of School Estimate (BoSE) spent the first thirty minutes or so of its March 31 public hearing going over mostly standard budget lines before opening the meeting to the public for comment. What followed were over two hours of public comment, with some residents making speeches lasting over twenty minutes each and others asking pointed questions about everything from attorneys' fees to the quarterly tests, from the technology investments to transparency issues regarding the Board of Education.



Resident Ira Shor took over twenty minutes to read off a laundry list of accusatory questions, many of which regarded issues that were revisited throughout the night by other residents. Shor insisted, among other things, that Marinus Consultants had performed a tech audit in October 2013 for readiness to administer the Partnership for Assessment or Readiness in College and Careers (PARCC) tests but did not release these audits as required by the New Jersey Department of Education of all districts, with a \$1.2 million expenditure in the proposed 2014-15 school budget for technology purchases.

"By going digital for PARCC," Shor declared, "we are stepping off a fiscal cliff. We must know what the costs are."

Shor sparked a heated response from the Board of Education's Chief Operations Officer Brian Fleischer, however, by insisting that he did not have required certification as a business administrator (BA) or as qualified purchasing assistant. Fleischer said that he had he only needed a certificate of eligibility based on his experience outside of New Jersey, and he had entered a mentoring program to take the necessary classes to acquire the additional certification.

"Someday, I will be a real BA," Fleischer said with obvious sarcasm, "but a certificate of eligibility is all one needs to be hired and to serve in the function of a business administrator, and I've heard this allegation too many times! It's absurd, it's completely false, I don't know where you get your information!"

Mayor Robert Jackson had to intervene to keep the sparring from getting out of hand, saying that Fleischer

had sufficiently answered the question. Shor finished by saying that these questions had to be answered before any approval of the budget is allowed.

Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller asked a follow-up reading Shor's question about Marinus. Fleischer denied that Marinus performed a PARCC tech audit, insisting that Marinus successfully won a request for proposal asked for basic tech assessment and showed the district where it was in terms of its network and Internet speeds and bandwidths, and whether it would support any PARCC testing, but it had nothing to do with a state mandate.

"I'm not sure where that came from," Fleischer stated.

Fleischer said Marinus also helped daily tech support when the district lost network administrator and needed to hire a tech director and helped hire one, as well as budget what was needed to comply with PARCC and how much to invest in improved routing.

Testing remained a contentious issue, with Christine McGoey saying that her son found the science test he's prepared for to be "ridiculous" and having nothing to do with the material he'd learned and suggesting that the \$490,000 spent on assessments could be used to better teach students. It should be noted that the \$490,000 was spent on curriculum development, which included assessments.

Resident Carol Schlein said that her son had a good experience with the biology assessments held on Monday and said it was "super-easy," and that the teacher didn't make any accommodations for anyone. Schlein added that the difference in the stress level her college freshman child and the stress level of her ninth-grade son is that there's much less stress with regard to the assessments. She said that while there may be more tests, the stakes are lower, there's "less prep" her son needs to do, and it's "an easier experience for us as a family." She added that he needs the tests to get his grade up.

Regarding the guidance department, Schlein said it was "misguided" to only look locally for a guidance director when you need to find someone who can make a call to a college admissions office anywhere in the country to help a student get in, and she also found the staffers in the central services office to be "high caliber people." She found answers to the questions about the budget to be very transparent.

Resident Marcella Simadiris found that assessments didn't narrow the achievement gap and only served to segregate classes along racial and ethnic lines. Schools Superintendent Penny MacCormack repeatedly responded to questions about the effectiveness of the tests with the same basic answer, saying that they were designed to identify strengths and weaknesses and give teachers an idea on how to address the latter, but residents were not so convinced. Regina Tuma, founder of Montclair Cares About Schools and another frequent attendee of board meetings, said that more students should opt out of what she called an "unfunded mandate" from Trenton.

Editor's Note: Tuma sent in a correction of her comments, clarifying her comments of "opting out":

I did not say that parents in Montclair should opt-out (though I should add that many parents have contacted us and are beginning to ask about opt-out options as Montclair moves to double test kids next year through quarterlies and PARCC).

My remarks on Monday were meant to get at the bigger picture and framing of the changes we are seeing here in Montclair—and hence, our budget. I was pointing to what is going on with these same corporate-style reforms in NY. NYC is 1- year ahead of Montclair with their implementation. There is much discontent and parents are choosing to opt-out their kids. Montclair parents need to think about why NY parents, who have more experience with these reforms, are so upset and for us to reflect where Montclair will be at this time next year.

The attorneys' fees sparked a good deal of criticism about the budget, with Tuma complaining about the expensive investigations of the leaked tests and against school board member David Cummings, as well as McGoe's charge of the board looking for ways to squelch dissent and discourage questions about the investigation. She found it concerning that the board would spend so much money on investigations as well as on assessments and ask for a tax increase, especially when the board had once considered closing schools in 2010 to avoid tax increases. Even the \$500,000 technology upgrades came under fire, with resident Maia Davis, also of Montclair Cares About Schools, saying that it was not appropriate "capital" spending priority because technology is a short-term investment and capital improvements are long-term. Resident David Herron's public comment became a fifteen-minute address, in which he chided the school board for putting more interest in tech improvements than the physical infrastructure of the school buildings and not providing enough transparency in their decision-making.

By contrast, the questions from members of the township council were rather perfunctory, with questions about general offices supplies and nurses for field trips. Councilor Spiller, though, asked about one of the more noteworthy line items, the addition of three new "uncommitted" kindergarten teachers and their salaries. Fleischer clarified that this was the language used before a decision on where to place the teachers was made; the board ultimately decided to place two teachers at Nishuane and one at Bullock.

At the close of the meeting, Mayor Jackson noted that he had been very liberal in allotting time to the members of the public, with some residents promising to be "brief" and taking as much time as Shor or Herron. The mayor had also in fact been more liberal with who could ask questions; not all of the participants were on the sign-up sheet. But he did say that he learned a lot by listening to the residents, and he hoped this would serve the BoSE well as they prepare to vote on the budget on April 7.

"I was pleased with the meeting. I intentionally gave each speaker great latitude on topics and time. I believe that there was a healthy and perhaps overdue dialogue. It was time well spent." Mayor Jackson told Barista Kids and added, "The vote is a work in progress. I'm confident that BOSE members will consider what was presented in the public hearings before making a decision."

First Ward Councilman William Hurlock tells Barista Kids that the public reaction he has received through emails, letters, phone calls and through talking with residents with regard to the 4.41 percent increase in the school portion of the property tax had been evenly divided. "Some people are in favor of the increase; others are concerned by the increase." Hurlock says he will spend the time before the April 7 meeting vote reviewing the budget thoroughly.

Councilor Spiller said, "Certainly, any reduction of class sizes in any area is something to be excited and pleased with." He added, however, "Many residents are concerned with the overall percentage increase. Therefore, it will be up to all of us to review each area of the budget carefully to determine if any cost savings can be realized without impacting instruction."

Board president Robin Kulwin says, "I am genuinely hopeful that the BoSE will endorse the budget as proposed by the Board of Education. Dr. MacCormack and Mr. Fleischer have responded comprehensively to questions posed by BoSE members. The requested tax increase is the first in three years, the administrative costs in Montclair are the lowest in Essex County, kindergarten classroom sizes are reduced, foreign language instruction will return to the elementary schools, and we establish a viable foundation upon which to build for the future."

Kulwin added, "Clearly there are diverse views in the community regarding education in general and there always will be. Those discussions will continue and we will work with one another. Whether it is tackling the achievement gap or how to best help all of our students succeed, at the end of the day we share a common

goal. The 2013-2014 proposed budget is a step in that direction.”

The adoption of the budget will be on April 7. On that date, the regular Board meeting will begin at 6:15 pm (6:45 for members of the public) in the MHS Auditorium, and be temporarily suspended at 8 pm, at which time the BSE meeting will convene. Following the conclusion of the BSE meeting, the BOE meeting will reconvene.