Groton-Dunstable Regional School District

FAQ's – Questions asked via budgetquestions@gdrsd.org

Updated: April 10, 2025

I saw that March 12th is the next school committee meeting to certify the budget. Is this where the final decision will be made to submit either the level budget or one of the scenarios? You are correct, the school committee is meeting to certify the budget on March 12th. It is my understanding they are planning on certifying Scenario 1: the Superintendent's Proposed budget (the highest one). This budget will require an override in both towns.

- Do you need parent and public support or comments at this meeting and can we offer input on which budget we think should be put forward? We always encourage public comment to voice your support or concerns. The school committee has held many, many budget forums since January with very little public participation to date.

- Would any important override votes or motions be heard at the Town Meeting and is the town aware they scheduled it for the Saturday towards the end of April break? My family will still be away and I'm not sure how many other district families would be in the same boat. It doesn't seem like an ideal choice and I'm curious if the Town can be encouraged to reschedule. Groton has determined that their Annual Town Meeting will be April 26th with the knowledge that it is the second weekend of school vacation. In working collaborately with the Town, we believe that the select boards in each town will put a warrant article for the town meeting to vote on and move the question to a ballot vote on May 20th.

- If anything less than the level services budget moves forward, or if any of the overrides fail, I would like to move parents (and community members who are so willing) towards a "voluntary override" donation. Basically a suggested donation of what their override taxes would have been, if they feel they can afford it, or another amount of their choosing. Do you have advice on whether this could help? I'm assuming the best strategy might be to wait until or if an override fails so the public doesn't just think there will be a potential fall back. In the event the potential override fails in one or both towns, there will be cuts between $875K and $1.7M dollars to the Superintendent's Proposed budget. The best long term financial impact for the school district is that the override passes at town meeting and at the ballot. In this way, the town has the ability to build the tax base to support expenses in future years. One time gifts, as you are suggesting, would not save positions in perpituity as they are one time funds. I tend to agree with you that the best strategy would be to wait for the results of the override votes and let that process play through. For information purposes, donations and gifts can be made to the school district at any time and can designated as restricted (for a specific purpose) or unrestricted (to be used at the district's discretion). They are required to be accepted by the school committee.

Where will the money come from for this over ride will our property taxes increase? Will this be a permanent increase to our property taxes if this is approved? Yes, your property tax will increase if the voters approve this operational override. It is a permanent increase to the tax levy, thus, an increase to your property taxes. I am unsure if you are a Groton or Dunstable resident, but if you are in Dunstable, the override includes town operating expenses as well as school district expenses.

How much is the district asking for this budget year? The school committee voted to support a total operational budget of $50,860,770. This represents a 6.53% increase.

Every school budget year has been asking for an over ride why is this happening every year? The school district funding comes from 2 major sources: the state Chapter 70 funding and the town assessments. The state funding does not grow at a proportional rate to the growth of our budget as we are considered a "hold harmless" school district. For this upcoming year, the current draft state funding has our district getting an increase of only $75 per student or $172,500. Thus, the burden of picking up the rest of increasing operations is put on the backs of the towns. We are not unique in this situation. There is currently a movement by our political representatives (called Project 211+23) to have the Chapter 70 formula recalculated. The town selectboards, finance committees and the school committee are all working collaboratively to support this movement and advocate for more money for our community.

I have attached a copy of our latest presentation that may answer more of your questions as well as illustrate what the school district will need to cut in the event the overrides do not pass. Just a reminder that last year the district cut $2.4 million from it's budget and reduced our staff by over 24 positions.

We are also holding many more budget forums for folks to express concerns and ask questions. You can go to our website www.gdrsd.org and click on "menu" and then "events". This will show you a calendar of school district events including these forums. You can also find all of our budget materials right on the front page of the website.

Pg 35 - what is "teaching services"? It's a very strange line going from 62k to -410k and then back to 108k...? There are 2 accounts that make up this total. Once is longevity and the other is an account that we keep a current running total of the over/under amount of salary budget. At the beginning of the year, we cannot charge any salaries to the grants until the grants are approved in October. So most of the negative $410K will be moved to grant funding by the end of this year as we use all grant money. The remaining amount will only be longevity expense which is a contractual amount in the teacher's contract. The longevity expense of $108K (FY26) from $62K (FY24) reflects new terms in the teacher's contract.

Pg 41 - why do "administrative salaries" and "secretarial salaries" each appear twice as separate line items with different values? The different line items reflect different departments. Our account numbers are structured for DESE reporting, so each department under the central office can have administration expense and secretarial expense. For example, the account that starts

010.1210... is the Superintendent and his administrative assistant. The account that starts 010.1410...is the Director of Finance (me) and the Secretarial salaries are actually the 3 part time workers in the business office for payroll and accounts payable.

Pg 47 - is the increase in "water-athletic fields" due to the pfas issue? The short answer is yes. The school is expected to tie into town of Groton water very shortly (the infrastructure is being put in next week). Before the PFAS issue, we used our well water that was free. Now we will need to pay for water supply for drinking and irrigation.

Pg 49 - why have custodial contracted services increased so steeply in 2025/2026? The custodial contract went up this current year because the square footage of Florence Roche almost doubled, therefore we needed to increase the contract as it was above and beyond the scope that the vendor bid on. The contract is expiring on June 30, 2025 and we will be going out to bid soon. Based on other districts who have gone out to bid recently, these are the estimates for getting a new contract. I have costed out the possibility of bringing these services back in house, but with salary and benefits it is still more cost effective to contract this work out.

Pg 53 - maybe an oddly specific question, but the high school heating costs show an odd trend. Was there something that helped us save money in 2025 but then is reverting back in 2026? At the time the FY25 budget was being built, the FY24 amount was trending lower...but that is not where the year end actuals landed. The trend is inching toward the $110K mark for this year, which means I will need to transfer budget funds at the end of the year to cover this overage.

Pg 56 - are we hiring more paras at Florence Roche in 2026, or is the 67% increase from raises? The percent increase didn't seem as steep for paras in other schools (except Boutwell), but maybe that's a matter of just how many paras are at FloRo? I know they got very well-deserved raises, I'm just trying to understand if there's more to that increase. Great question. In past years, we have had IDEA grant money (special ed) from prior years that we would strategically roll forward to cover paraprofessional salaries. We would use current grant money and general fund for the rest. Over the past 2 years of reductions, we used all the prior year money to retain as much staff as we could. This means that more need to be funded out of the General Fund, which is where the town assessments come from.

Pg 60 - same question for paras at Boutwell It is the same answer, but we also transferred some paras to Boutwell to address new student enrollments that required additional paraprofessionals.

Pg 80 - where are we getting new computers, and is there any opportunity for savings there? I would hope that if we end up needing to make cuts, that we could prioritize keeping staff over stuff as much as possible. Page 80 reflects capital expenditures that are separate from operating expenditures. These expenditures are for our existing leases (which we have to pay) along with a capital expenditure for projector/panel replacements. On page 86, there is a breakdown of what makes up the $362,250. This was a planned replacement. When we give the Town's assessments, we break down

operating and capital, as the funding comes from different funding sources at the town level. Capital funding can not be used for operating.

-The custodial contract is getting more expensive will be possible to hybryd model for example day crew school employees night crew cleaning company? Also why is district willing to hire teachers but not custodians and cafe workers that seems pretty unfair to me.

Thank you very much for taking the time to ask your question. You are correct, the cleaning contract has increased more than projected this year and next year. This year, we needed to increase our contract because the square footage of the new Florence Roche basically doubled. That was not what the cleaning company bid on, so we need to add to the scope of service to cover the additional cost of cleaning a bigger building. Our contract also expires at the end of this school year and we will shortly be going back out to bid. Typically, the first year of these contracts have a big jump in the first year to catch up with inflation over the past 5 years.

We originally went to a contract based on an operational audit performed in 2017 with the recommendation to outsource both the custodial services and the cafeteria staff. We do still employ 3 cafeteria workers, as that was the agreement made with the union at the time of the crossover. As our employees left our employ, the contractor (Whitsons) could hire the replacement. I have done an analysis to see if hiring custodial staff back would be cost effective, however hiring the number of staff to equal the hours of cleaning now would actually cost more in contractual salaries plus benefits including health care (the school district's portion of health care for a family plan is close to $30,000 alone).

I will continue to analyze the cost effectiveness of the contracts and make recommendations in the best interest of the school district and communities.

- Food service bad debt (Page 49) what is that?

The food service program is self-sufficient and runs in a revolving fund (page 68). Mass General Law states that if any student has a negative balance at the end of the year that goes uncollected, a funding source other than the food service revolving fund must pay the balance. This would be the general fund. As you can see from the budget book, there have been no expenses past or present that have been charged here.

- Is the operational audit completed. If yes where may obtain a copy of the audit report?

The operational audit is still in progress. Once the final report is complete and presented to the school committee, the school district will post it on our website and communicate to the community its availability.

Culture & Climate related questions:

Can you please provide the cost *or estimated cost* of the recent (or prior) Culture & Climate Survey ?

The cost to the district for administering the culture and climate survey is minimal, mostly for the software we use to build it, disseminate, and analyze the results. We use Qualtrics, which overall cost $7,350, of which $4,500 was paid for by a Title IV student support grant we secured. While this survey and the analysis of its results is not mandated by DESE, it is an integral component of the district's three year required and approved Student Opportunity Act Plan (SOA) submitted last year (spring 2024). We have presented results from last year - there is a survey for students, staff, and families - at two different School Committee meetings, and we have formed a community-wide district data team that has informed the School Committee as well as district leadership regarding the results and how they can inform our district and school improvement plans.

Do you run any surveys where the students and teachers can provide input on how they perceive their educational experience and what suggestions they may have regarding academics?

Questions related to educational experience and academics are integrated into the culture and climate survey.

Specifically (and I know this has been brought up multiple times before) - has the school district done a look back or actively sought feedback on switching the WIN period to Advisory?
We definitely received feedback on WIN and advisory as part of the culture and climate survey (as well as anecdotally), particularly at the middle school. As a result, we are weighing whether or not we need to rethink advisory blocks to allow for more structured and individualized academic support for all kids (a combination Advisory/WIN model).

Why not ask the student population & parents which they find more beneficial to learning? As reading and math proficiency rates are not where they should be, any extra time provided the students during WIN period to jumpstart their homework or seek extra help from a teacher would have a direct effect on student achievement.

As mentioned above, this did come up in the results of the culture and climate survey and I have received feedback outside of survey results as well.

There have also been many creative ideas brought to the administration (thank you for being very open and proactive in this area) in terms of community help and involvement, including use of retired teachers, honor students, retired military, and great ideas from past educators i.e.: Nikki Rockwell and so many great teachers. Is there a way for the administration to be more transparent in these areas so the community can know if these have been considered?

YES - still working on this - and many ideas will get implemented - it's been wonderful to connect with so many members of the community - past, present, and future!

DEI on website: I do not see that the minutes have been posted since 2023 - I am not sure of the legality of this but if it's on your website, the community should be able to view the board's plans/goals.
Need to update this ASAP - thank you for bringing it to my attention!

Has the administration reviewed the legality of having Asst Superintendent and currently serving school board members on the DEI committee in light of the Federal Government Executive order?
We have reviewed and there is nothing illegal or improper about the constitution of or the work from, our DEI committee that serves in an advisory capacity to the School Committee. Multiple responses and guidance from the Governor, Attorney General, and Commissioner Tutwiler have assured us of this.