

## **School Budget FAQs**

### **Why did the school budget increase so much from FY25 to FY26?**

Expenses are increasing at much higher rates than the revenue available to support them:

- Chapter 70 funds, the largest source of state funding for schools, has not increased at a rate that keeps pace with inflation. Inflation affects all school costs: for busing, materials and supplies, contracted services, staff cost-of-living increases, specialists' services for special education needs, out-of-district placements, and Hampshire Regional tuition.
- State extraordinary relief and circuit breaker funds that provide some reimbursement to offset special education costs are not granted until a district meets a high threshold of spending per pupil, forcing the district to absorb most special education costs.
- Local tax revenue is not increasing enough to make up the difference.
- Loss of federal funding (\$177,000) that supported pandemic recovery investments has forced districts to choose between eliminating those interventions or redirecting other revenue to sustain them.

### **Why can't we just send our students to Gateway?**

That would require a tuition agreement between the two districts, and could potentially cost the town more. The most current (2023) per-pupil costs for Gateway on the DESE website is \$22,455.52. The 2023 Worthington per-pupil cost is considerably less, at \$19,863.43.

### **Why can't we close Conwell and let families send their kids wherever they want using school choice?**

School districts are legally required to guarantee access to education for all resident students in grades K-12. Worthington must meet this requirement with a local school, membership in a regional school, or a tuition agreement guaranteeing "slots" for all Worthington students in all grades. School choice does not provide those guarantees.

### **How much is added to the school budget to educate students from other towns?**

Nothing. We have a total of 11 school choice students and will receive \$55,000 for FY25 for these students (\$5K per student). Worthington only makes school choice slots available to students from other towns when there are openings in existing classrooms. Worthington does not expand staffing to accept school choice students.

### **Why are the special education costs so high?**

Circuit Breaker reimbursement for special education is called "fully funded" — but the definition of fully funded is a reimbursement of just 75% (a return of 75 cents for every dollar spent) over the annual threshold of a per-pupil special education cost. That threshold is set every year; for the current year, it is \$52,419.

We have new contractual increases in out-of-district costs, including a significant transportation increase.

In all districts, special education services and costs are dictated by student needs and those needs change. In a large district, the overall costs may remain more stable because there are more total students receiving services. In a smaller district, the cost fluctuations are more apparent. (Because of this, the school committee reserves a third of our school choice money each year as a bulwark against unexpected special ed costs, but this does not provide for ongoing needs.)

**Why aren't all line items in the school budget reduced to present voters with a lower budget?**

Most of the budget line items are fixed costs determined by contracts: busing, Hampshire Regional tuition, staff salaries, special education services, and other contractual fees are all fixed. The only places the district can reduce costs are in basic supplies, faculty continuing education, and by reducing essential staff.

**Can the school just cut the "extras" to reduce the budget?**

The elementary school budget, which is the part of the budget that the district can control, is built on a multigrade classroom model that minimizes the number of classroom teachers and uses paraprofessionals to support those teachers in providing students with lessons in groups that meet their needs. "Specials" (physical education, music and art) are all required curriculum in Massachusetts and need to be provided by teachers certified in those fields.

**What happens to the school if the override doesn't pass?**

The finance committee and selectboard have directed the school committee to develop an alternative draft budget that reflects 8% and 12% cuts. The only way to accomplish these cuts is to eliminate staff training and lay off essential staff.

**How are other towns dealing with budget challenges?**

Staff layoff, reduction or elimination of programs and services, and even school closures.

**How many families in Worthington would be impacted if the school were to close both in employment and enrollment?**

76 students in grades preschool through sixth grade would be displaced; 65 are Worthington residents. 26 faculty and staff would lose their positions; 11 are Worthington residents.

The school cannot simply close. Worthington would have to negotiate a tuition agreement with another district for all of Worthington students to attend that district. It is unclear whether surrounding districts would have the capacity to guarantee space for Worthington students, and Worthington would have little control over the cost of the negotiated tuition agreement and would have no control over the education our students receive.

**Why are we paying tuition for some elementary school students to receive their education in other districts?**

When a student attends another district as a school choice student, the town pays the \$5,000 school choice fee. If a student attends another district because Worthington is unable to meet the students' special educational needs within our district, Worthington is legally mandated to pay the cost of those services.

**If we are paying so much for transportation, why can't we just buy a van and pay a driver?**

Worthington has repeatedly investigated this possibility (and so have other small districts). The costs of the insurance required to transport students and the availability of drivers with the necessary license have been prohibitive, thus far.

**How will federal cuts affect Worthington's school budget?**

The funds the Worthington district receives directly from the federal government are a small proportion of the annual budget (\$39,000). The district has prepared for the possibility of losing those funds, but it is unlikely since the federal funds (Title 1 and Special Education) are provided by law. As of yet, there has been no loss of state funds allocated to the district.