

MIDDLETOWN LEADS

WHAT IS MIDDLETOWN LEADS?

Middletown Leads is a weekly newsletter intended to connect the Middletown community by providing information about the civic undertakings of the Town.

TOWN COUNCIL/SCHOOL COMMITTEE WORKSHOP

On Monday, May 6, 2019, the Middletown Town Council met with the Middletown School Committee and school department administrators to discuss specifics related to the school budget that had not been addressed at the All-Day meeting on April 27th.

A list of issues was printed in the May 11th Middletown Leads newsletter, along with a graphic which provided a visual representation of the current state of the school department. Discussion focused on three areas: special education, administrative bonuses, and student performance.

STAFFING

School budget discussions began with questions about the way the school department has addressed anticipated revenue over the previous years when it was known that state aid would be reduced.

School administrators stated that it makes decisions about elimination or recall based on anticipated enrollment. For example, this year a reduction of an Art teacher is planned, and last year a Music teacher was eliminated.

It was pointed out that the enrollment of military children fluctuates at the beginning and in the middle of the year, so staffing is not easily predictable.

Questions were asked about services for children who do not speak English. The response was that there are 2 teachers, one serving K-8 and one serving MHS. There were further questions about expenses related to Special Education.

When asked about elimination or non-renewals of teachers, the school department said that 4 teachers were retiring (a high school art teacher, 2 elementary teachers, and a special education resource teacher.) Currently, 8 nonrenewals are projected.

No information was offered about reductions in any other area.

ADMINISTRATIVE COMPENSATION

The most animated discussion was related to the compensation of those employees who are not members of any union. Data was provided from FY13 to FY18 amounting to more than \$250,000.

The response from the school department was that bonuses were awarded in place of salary increases. However, some of the bonuses amounted to as much as 4% increases when at no time did the teachers receive 4% increases and, in some years, they did not receive increases at all.

For example, in FY13, the teacher contract provided a 0 % increase while top administrators received \$3,800, \$4,500, and \$4,000.

Similarly, in FY16, when the teacher contract provided a 0 % increase, top administrators received \$8,000 each.

The school department responded to this inequity by saying that the bonuses were awarded for the previous fiscal year. It should be noted that in FY 15, the previous fiscal year of the \$8,000 bonuses, performance bonuses were awarded in the amounts of \$6,000.

Members of the Town Council also noted that the bonuses appeared to be awarded in Executive Session rather than Open Session when the public would have access to the information. One School Committee member claimed that personnel matters were appropriate for Executive Session. This claim was not well received.

Additional data provided by the school department reflects 2% increases for FY19 awarded across the board for the non-union personnel.

It was noted that the School Department has almost always requested the maximum increase under RI law while using claims of the need to cut activities and athletic programs while it awarded bonuses for less than stellar performance, as indicated by the assessment results.

MIDDLETOWN HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

At the request of a member of the Town Council the school department provided a printout of the enrollment of individual courses by sections. The maximum class size in the teacher contract is 25 students.

The printout clearly identified the current enrollment at Middletown High School: 165 students in grade 9, 99 students in grade 10, 138 students in grade 11, 132 students in grade 12, and 85 students specified as special education for a current total of 619 students. (It should be noted that, largely due to military transfers, the total number can fluctuate minimally from day to day.)

High school scheduling depends on 2 main variables: the number of courses offered and the number of students at each grade level. The number of sections of each course depends on the number of students and the ability of the schedule to meet student needs when students in different grades have signed up for different courses.

There are 2 scheduling options for administrators who are cognizant of the budget impact on taxpayers of each additional teacher: offer fewer courses or offer fewer sections.

A review of the scheduling document reflected several anomalies, among others:

- A disproportionate number of sections of AP/Honors classes in all grades
- A disproportionate number of class sections below 20 students
- A phasing out of French instruction (leaving only Spanish)

The data shows that the school department has attempted to maintain an educational program that meets the needs of its students without regard for the financial impact on taxpayers.

Going forward, both the Town and the School Department will have to make some decisions that will not please everyone.

CURRICULUM/ASSESSMENT ISSUES

The poor assessment results of RI districts, including Middletown's, was attributed to the multiple changes in state testing.

FOOTNOTE

Editorial essays appear occasionally at the following website: <https://middletownleads.blogspot.com/>