

BROOKLINE COMMUNITY AGING NETWORK
Livable Community Advocacy Committee (LCAC)

January 8, 2024

Attending: Susan Granoff (Chair, Presenter), Helen Charlupski (Guest Presenter), Suzanne Federspiel (Guest Presenter), Carol Seibert (Notetaker), Janet Gelbart, Yolanda Rodriguez, John Seay, Harry Friedman, David Trevvett, Henry Winkelman, Diana McClure, Katie Hope, Fran Perler, Susan Cohen, Susan Park, Jane Flanagan, Rosamond Rabinowitz, Maureen Mayotte, Marion Freedman-Gurspan

1. A Conversation with Brookline School Committee Members

Guest Presenters: School Committee Members Helen Charlupski and Suzanne Federspiel

According to the School Committee website:

The School Committee consists of 9 members elected town-wide for three year terms. Its main responsibilities are to evaluate the superintendent, to review and approve budgets for public education in the district, and to establish educational goals and policy for the schools.

Helen Charlupski was first elected to the School Committee in 1992. She holds a BA and Master of Social Work from the University of Michigan. She was a member of the Early Childhood Advisory Council of the MA Department of Education from 1994 to 2004 and has been the MA Association of School Committees representative to the Department of Early Education and Care since its inception in 2005. She has three children who graduated from the Runkle School and Brookline High School.

Suzanne Federspiel was first elected to the School Committee in 2017. She has been an educator for more than thirty years in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Recently, she's served as a special education teacher, a literacy coach, and as an elementary school principal for the Boston Public Schools. In addition to her degrees in education from U-Conn, Storrs, and U-Mass, Amherst, Suzanne has an MBA from Boston University. Her two children attended Pierce School and Brookline High School.

To begin the program, the presenters asked the attendees to introduce themselves and to give them some idea of our interests and concerns with regard to the School Committee. What followed was an informative question and answer session based on those concerns. The questions and answers are arranged by topic and not necessarily listed in the order they were addressed at the meeting.

BUDGET

Q 1. The current annual School budget of \$137 million is a higher percentage of the Town's budget than the total amount allotted to all the other Town departments combined. Most other Town departments are reporting that they are unable to fulfill some of their key functions due to difficulties in hiring and retaining employees. The reason cited is that Brookline is no longer offering municipal employee salaries that are comparable to the salaries being paid by neighboring municipalities.

In contrast, Brookline's Council on Aging, which provides services to approximately 13,000 older residents of Brookline and operates the Senior Center, receives less than \$1.2 million of the Town's budget or about ¼ of 1%. And Brookline's Public Health and Human Services Department receives less than \$1.5 million from the Town.

How conscious of this imbalance is the School Committee when making spending decisions? And what steps could be taken to adjust this imbalance?

Answer 1:

The School Committee is notified of the amount of its annual budget by the Town Administrator and the Finance Director, based on the Town/School Partnership. Last year the budgeted amount was short by \$1.8 million. As a result, staff reductions had to be made, especially in the coaching and specialist staff. Personnel accounts for about 88% of the School budget, so when we cut personnel, that has a direct effect on our students. We try not to take more than our share of the town budget while maintaining the quality of Brookline education.

Attendee comment:

The Town/School Partnership only decides on the allocation between the schools and the rest of the town of additional money each year, a relatively small amount of the budget. But while the Town has in general had to abide by the Prop 2 ½ restrictions, the schools have been able to resort to overrides. In many cases, those overrides included little or no money for any department other than the schools. You are hearing pent-up frustrations because of the apparent inequity.

Q 2: Other Town Departments have sometimes been asked to reduce their budgets by 10%. Can the School Committee reduce its budget by 10% too?

Answer 2:

- a. To cut 13 million dollars from the \$137,000,000 school budget would make education in Brookline look very different. The only way to do that would be to raise class sizes to 30-35 students. The biggest issue with our budget is Proposition 2½, the percentage of allowable tax growth as prescribed by the State. This percentage is too low to meet the cost of doing business. Inflation, recently as high as 8%, means higher costs. The School Committee attempts to examine closely where the spending is going while maintaining the desired student/teacher ratio.
- b. The School Committee has been diligent in reducing costs where possible. For example, a number of expensive leases of school space are being terminated, including one on Clark Road that cost over \$1 million per year. There are plans to continue working for cost savings. When the Pierce School is ready for use, it will be possible to terminate the lease at Temple Ohabei Shalom. There is a plan for doing that as we bring on more preschool classrooms.

Q 3: Why, in the face of declining enrollments, does the School budget keep rising? What are the factors driving the School budget?

Answer 3:

- a. It is true that school enrollment went down by about 800 students during and after Covid. The decrease was largely a decrease in students from abroad who were unable to obtain visas. And those students still have not come back. For the two and one half years of the emergency, students

were not getting what they needed, especially in terms of mental health support and socializing. The School Committee made a conscious decision to keep class sizes low. This year enrollment, at 7180 students, is still not quite back to pre-Covid levels. On the other hand, the High School enrollment is up by 150 students.

- b. “We have to take everyone who comes.” Brookline has a substantial number of English language learners and special education students. Unlike other school districts, Brookline does not send its special ed students out of district at a cost of \$100,000 per student. We have many innovative programs that help to save money, and perhaps should make them more visible to the Brookline public.
- c. Our preschool programs are probably the best in Massachusetts. Any Brookline child has the opportunity to apply to attend Brookline’s public preschools starting at age 3. We have about 280 preschool students now and hope to increase that number. In Massachusetts, schools are mandated to provide education for students with disability and an Individualized Education Program from ages 3 to 22.

Q 4: Do you foresee any additional debt exclusions/overrides for schools in the next ten years? Single-family homeowners have just been hit with a 10% property tax increase. We are driving away the middle class in Brookline.

Answer 4:

- a. Some communities have overrides every year. Brookline has a limited commercial tax base. One helpful development has been the growth of hotel occupancy in Brookline. Hotels provide revenue to the town without overloading its services.
- b. The School Committee expects a 40-50 year lifetime for its school buildings before we need to renovate or build new. The Baker School will be the next school for renovation. We attempt to get funding from the Massachusetts School Building Authority and have been successful in obtaining this funding for the majority of our buildings. We have also been fortunate to obtain bonds at 1-2% interest rates. Some 4 million dollars that had been borrowed for the Ridley School are now freed up for the Pierce

project. We need to build the schools for functionality for 21st century learning, enhancing the educational environment for both teachers and students. At Pierce, we are looking at sustainability with an eye to installing such items as flooring, lighting, etc. with a long life-expectancy. We may pay more now, but will save money by not having to replace these.

Q 5. Could school costs be decreased by using volunteers, possibly some older residents, for some functions as the Health Department is doing currently?

Answer 5:

Enlisting help from volunteers would require a support staff to organize the volunteers. You'd have to think about training, about CORI checks, and how to provide close supervision and evaluation. It can be done, but while it would provide a service to the children, it doesn't really save the school money.

Q 6. Brookline School rankings appear to be going down. How is this possible when we devote so much of the town's resources to the schools? Does the relatively large population of English learners impact the rankings?

Answer 6:

Rankings are done by many different organizations using many different criteria. In some, Brookline ranks very well, for example in the top 5 this year. In others, based on different criteria, we are lower. In one example, we came in at #25, based on erroneous data used by the State. And it is true that when you have a large population of English learners, that would, for example, impact MCAS scores, the State's test. While there is an alternate testing procedure for non-English speakers, it isn't often used. Over-reliance on MCAS is a problem. We prefer measures like our "Profile of a Graduate" that attempts to look at the whole student and asks the question: "How do we say that this student is well-educated?"

CURRICULUM

Q 7: Is it true that the number of elective courses available to students is being reduced?

Answer 7:

Brookline high school has a phenomenal catalog of over 700 elective courses offering students a wide selection of choices. That catalog is available on line.

Q 8: Has the “Facing History and Ourselves” course been discontinued?

Answer 8:

- a. This is an 8th grade course. Due to teacher turnover, it has been necessary to re-invigorate this offering, especially after the events of October 7 in the Middle East. For teachers to be ready to offer this course, some additional professional development is necessary. We hope to make this available to every student in the 8th grade as it has been in the past.
- b. One particularly striking example of a method we have used for teaching history is the *Cattle Car Exhibit*, a sound and light production that teaches 10th graders about the second World War.

Q 9: How do the schools work to educate those with learning disabilities?

Answer 9:

- a. Brookline has a 15-18% special education population in the elementary schools. This includes children with dyslexia, severe mental health problems, and autism. Different Brookline elementary schools each have their own special programs to promote learning for this population. There is a lab-based program for children who are dyslexic in the Driscoll school. The TLC program at the Ridley school offers special services for children with severe mental health issues. Many of these programs include “pull-outs” to separate classrooms. At the Runkle school there is the Rise program for kids on the autism spectrum.
- b. In the high school there are multiple programs like Ace and Excel available for students with learning disabilities of various kinds. The Winthrop House is another example. High school students with special needs can spend much of the day in this setting.

Q 10: How much did Covid set the system back and how are the schools attempting to recoup those educational losses?

Answer 10: There are two big concerns in education: academics and socialization skills: Catching up with academic learning is on track. We know how to do that. But the loss of social skills since Covid still needs to be addressed at every grade level. In Brookline we are giving students opportunities for social/emotional learning in pre-K through high school. Last summer, with a grant, we offered a program for “enhanced social learning” for any elementary school student whose parents wished them to participate. This summer the program will be available for children who are referred. We have hired additional social workers. It’s our goal that every student is known by name and has one or two adults they feel comfortable talking with at school.

Q 11. What steps are you taking to promote civic education?

Answer 11:

- a. In the 8th grade students receive a formal introduction to Civics. History is a required high school subject. In addition, we have an Honors AP course and a number of electives geared to teaching citizenship skills with a focus on political action and personal responsibility in a democracy. There is an ongoing effort in pre-K- 8 and in the high school to interest students in activism.
- b. When there is a subject the student is excited about, perhaps environmental or climate concerns, teachers encourage those students to learn how to do the research and how to deliver a presentation on their topic. We have had students making presentations at our School Committee meetings during the public comment period. The Student Councils also have representation to the administration.
- c. The students receive instruction in how to evaluate the trustworthiness of different media even as early as the 4th grade.

Q 12: Do they still teach cursive writing?

Answer 12:

Some teachers teach cursive writing or spelling. In K-2 we have a real focus on literacy.

Q 13: Phonics: Have the schools re-introduced this method for teaching reading and writing to beginners?

Answer 13:

Yes, phonics is part of the curriculum in several programs and we try to identify children with dyslexia or otherwise those who need special attention.

Q 14: Schools are very “trendy.” My concern is how do you think about the impact on students with special needs as you introduce new methods and programs? In general, what kinds of evaluation are done prior to introducing new programs?

Answer 14:

Yes, there tends to be a pendulum swing in educational trends. In former times, the focus was on bolstering student self esteem. We’re moving now in a direction of more rigor.

Q 15. How do you work to encourage the love of learning?

Answer 15:

We talk about the joy of learning all the time. Superintendent Guillory has introduced the “Spotlight on Excellence.” This allows special projects that students are excited about to be featured at a School Committee meeting and shared with the community at large. We celebrate learning and keep parents informed about what their kids are learning with our newsletters.

SECURITY AND WELLNESS

Q 16: Is it true that there are no cameras in the schools? How is that possible in this era of school shootings?

Answer 16:

Cameras have been installed outside every elementary school and outside the high school. There are concerns about the invasion of privacy with cameras inside the schools. There may be specific instances where cameras would be used if needed for a particular purpose, but we don’t want students to feel they

are imprisoned. Cameras don't prevent shootings. The best protection is knowing our students.

Q. 17: Have cellphones been banned in the Brookline schools?

Answer 17:

No, but cellphones are not to be used in class. If a student violates that rule, the cellphone may be confiscated.

Q 18: Are there security guards in the schools?

Answer 18:

There are no security guards, but In the high school we do have personnel who monitor the campus and are expected to identify anyone who does not belong.

Q 19: What steps do you take to reduce drug usage among students? Studies have shown that 7% of 9th graders and 40% of high school students are using marijuana.

Answer 19:

The most important is knowing our students and creating an environment where teens can come forward to talk about a friend who is struggling. In wellness classes, high school freshmen are instructed in the harms of marijuana and other illicit drugs.

Conclusion:

Susan Granoff thanked our presenters for beginning a very informative dialogue with our members. We hope there will be other such opportunities for the sharing of ideas and concerns. We should continue to look for ways to involve older residents in school functions. For example, as part of the Senior Property Tax Work-Off Program, some seniors are working in school libraries.

When spending decisions are made we hope the School Committee will bear in mind the impact that school spending has on the ability of every other Town department to fulfill its function. Town overrides will continue to be necessary, as with the replacement of the 100 year old firehouse. But these are infrequent. On the other hand, it sounds as if overrides and debt exclusions are built-in to our

funding strategies for the schools. Many taxpayers have yet to feel the impact of the tax increases for new school construction debt exclusions that have already been approved by Brookline voters. When those begin to be felt, it could be more difficult to persuade voters to pass additional overrides. The message we hope you will take from today's meeting is that we want the School Committee to be conscious of the ways its budget affects the quality of life outside the schools for Brookline residents and to reduce expenses in any way you can while still protecting the quality of Brookline education.

Both presenters invite us to attend their School Committee meetings and to have a look at their website to stay abreast of school developments. They have also provided this link to the Superintendent's newsletter:

<https://www.brookline.k12.ma.us/site/default.aspx?PageType=14&DomainID=4&PageID=1&ModuleInstanceID=5231&ViewID=fa1f7d98-e7bf-458b-a7e2-7d51c266e481&IsMo>

2. **Report on Fall 2023 Town Meeting**

Presenter: Susan Granoff (Advisory Committee Member and Town Meeting Member)

Susan Granoff, due to time constraints, gave a very abbreviated review of the results of the Fall Town Meeting, which passed major new zoning regulations to comply with the MBTA Communities Act, which included the re-zoning of most of Harvard Street to permit more "of right" development. Another important vote approved a home rule petition seeking state authorization for implementing a rent stabilization program in Brookline.

A State appropriation of \$126,823 from Uber/Lyft fare surcharges was divided as follows: \$100,000 for Council on Aging Senior Center transportation programs and \$26,823 for additional benches on Brookline sidewalks, a favorite project of Frank Caro, former Chair of LCAC.

Of Note: the current Circuit Breaker Tax Credit has more than doubled. Qualified residents may be eligible for up to \$2,500 in income tax credit on the Massachusetts state income tax form.

3. **LCAC: The Year Ahead**

Susan Granoff opened a discussion about the future of the LCAC as we enter a new year. She is concerned that we will need to think about succession plans for the roles of Chair and Notetaker. It may be advisable to have others take on these roles on occasion. Because this committee serves an important function in the community, she is asking that we work to plan ahead for a natural transition when changes become necessary. Please pass any suggestions to Susan.

Agendas for the start of 2024: In preparation for the Spring Town Meeting, we plan to invite the candidates for Select Board to speak with LCAC in February and March. In April and May, we can hear from the proponents of Warrant Articles of interest to older residents and possibly from any candidates for Moderator.

An additional agenda could include Roger Blood and a discussion on affordable housing.

4. **Other Business:** None
5. **Date of Next Meeting:** **February 5.**

The Livable Community Advocacy Committee is one of several BrooklineCAN committees. Everyone is welcome to attend, but if you do so regularly, we invite you to support BrooklineCAN with your membership. You can join using PayPal, credit card, or by check. Instructions are on the right-hand sidebar on the front page of brooklinecan.org. Thank you!