

**South Kingstown School Committee
and Town Council Joint Meeting
Budget Work Session #3
Town Council Chambers, 2nd Floor
180 High Street
Wakefield, RI 02879
Tuesday, March 17, 2026**

1. Call to Order

A. Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. McEntee led the Pledge of Allegiance.

B. Land Acknowledgement Statement

Mr. McEntee read the Land Acknowledgement Statement.

Town Council members present: Rory McEntee, Council President; Michael Marran, Council Vice-President; Deborah Bergner, Patricia Alley, Jay Wegimont

Others present: James Manni, Town Manager; Brian Silvia, Finance Director

School Committee members present: Carol Vetter, Chairperson, James Restivo, Vice-Chairperson, Paula Whitford, Kate Macinanti

School Committee members absent: Michelle Brousseau, Bradley Shear, and Stewart Lander

Others present: Michael Podraza, Superintendent; Daniel Seger, Assistant Superintendent; Ryan Kilpatrick, Chief Financial Officer

C. Discussion Re: FY 2026-2027 School Unrestricted Fund

D. Discussion of school-related topics, including, but not limited to, school enrollment, school Capital Improvement Program projects, School Facilities Project, funding allocation for the School Department, and Town/School Other Post Employment Benefits (OPEB) Fund.

Mr. Manni gave a brief introduction to the request from the school department (an increase of \$2.5 million in property tax transfer). He shared that the Town Manager's Proposed Budget presented to the Town Council last week recommends level funding for the school department for the fiscal year 2026-2027. It does not reflect an increase in tax revenue transferred to the School Department. The meeting is then turned over to Mr. Podraza, Superintendent of the School Department, for its presentation.

Mr. Podraza shared that the fiscal year 2026 proposed budget represents more than just numbers. It reflects difficult choices and careful prioritization. The administrative team has worked diligently to reduce the initial budget projections by \$613,052, together with an additional \$1 million proposed use from the fund balance, while preserving the educational excellence the community expects and the students deserve. The presentation tonight will respond to community comments and address the common misunderstanding that often accompanies discussions about school obligations, laws, and regulations that affect schools and school districts. Mr. Podraza then shared that even with the \$1.6 million that has already been reduced by the school department, there is still a need for funding of approximately \$1.5 million to maintain a high-quality education that the community values and deserves. The request represents the minimum needed to maintain contractual class sizes, support the information student populations, fulfill contractual obligations, and continue the education and extracurricular programming that is currently in place this academic school year. The items presented and discussed are as follows:

- **Bottom Line Up Front**
 - Program & Student Stability
 - Key Funding Challenges
 - Strategic Consequence
- **Local Appropriation: Then vs. Now**
- **Relative Value: \$1 in 2020 vs. Purchasing Power in 2026**
- **Current Status**
 - **Priorities & Goals**
 - High Expectations & Equity
 - Trust & Respect
 - Inclusive Practices
 - Student & Family Voice
 - **Enrollment**
 - Students in SKSD Seats
 - SKSD Total Students
 - **Staffing**
 - Current

Reductions FY 27

Retirement/Replacement - 4 positions (-\$138,362)

Section Attrition/Position Eliminations Salary & Benefits - 4 positions (-\$447,178)

Position Reclassification/Salary Breakage - 1 position (-\$27,512)

Salaries & Benefits

- Fund Balance
- Current & Proposed FY 27
- Scenarios: CIP vs. Operations

• Challenges

- **Reduction in State Aid**
- **“Community Wealth”**
- **School Choice**
- **Contractual Obligations**
 - Employees
 - Purchased Services

• Assumptions

- **State & Federal Aid**
- **Employment Contracts**
 - NEASK (Teachers): 2.5%
 - SKESP (Para-educators): 2%
 - Council 94 (Custodians): 2%
 - Administration: 2%
- **Health & Benefits**
 - Originally believed to be approximately 10% for Health Care increase; notified that this will be closer to 12%
 - Other Benefits - originally believed to be 5%; notified that this will be closer to 8%
- **Other**
 - \$600,000 of FY26 is not available in maintenance of effort calculations for FY 27

• Revenue

• Expenditures

• Summary

- **Causes of ~\$4 Million Shortfall**
 - Unanticipated Loss of State Aid
 - Structure of Additional \$ in FY26 Local Transfer
 - Contractual Increases (Salaries & Benefits)
 - Anticipated Purchased Services Cost Increases
- **FY 27 Request Overview**
 - No Student Programs/Activities Eliminated
 - Increase Town Appropriation: @2.5 million
 - Reduction of Personnel -\$613,052
 - Use of Fund Balance for Operations: \$1.0 million

• Impact:

- CIP Projects Not Possible
- Shift Money Back to CIP if Fiscal Conditions Change

The presentation is concluded at this time.

Discussion ensues regarding the effect of six years of level funding and the avenues the district has used to be able to meet those budget constraints. After years of school closures, staffing cuts, and reserve use, there is no path to maintain current programs under continued level funding. Using more fund balance for operations without more local support is unsustainable and causes the inability to fund critical capital work. The 2.5 million increase is needed to keep all current programs and activities, honor contracts, and avoid deeper structural deficits. The Town Council reiterates that they must comply with Rhode Island's 4% tax levy cap. They also acknowledge that the Town is facing rapidly growing school bond debt service for the new high school (eventually \$6.5 to \$7.5 million per year in debt service). All members are concerned about the taxpayer burden, especially amidst inflation, housing, and insurance costs. Further discussion regarding additional efficiencies (savings from Curtis Corner demolition, exact charter returns, high-cost special education aid accuracy, benefit assumptions, and administrative raises). The Council states that there is a continued need to search for ways to partly fund the increase without fully relying on tax levy growth.;

At this time, Mr. McEntee opens Public Comment.

3. Public Comment

Jennifer Nerbonne - Ms. Nerbonne spoke in opposition to the proposed school budget increase, calling it unreasonable and out of touch with what families are experiencing. She argued that when household costs rise, families must cut back, reprioritize, or go without, and that the school and town budgets should follow the same discipline. Citing the magnitude of rising costs (approx. \$5.7M), she urged a serious review of efficiencies, potential reductions, and a reconsideration of benefit structures, including the planned 10% increase in employee health insurance costs, noting that in her 32-year corporate career, organizations have frequently adjusted and scaled back benefits to

adapt to financial realities. Ms. Nerbonne also challenged the framing of increased property values as community wealth, stressing that higher assessments do not translate into more disposable income. She noted many homeowners feel “stuck” in their homes due to high interest rates and the current housing market, and shared that her own assessment rose by about \$200,000, leading to a \$2,000 increase in homeowners’ insurance. With taxpayers already responsible for funding the \$150 million high school project, she questioned the fairness of asking for additional increases that may push the town near the 4% state tax cap, which she believes many residents do not fully understand. She emphasized that these are taxpayers’ dollars, not the district’s to allocate freely, and urged the council to prioritize, reduce where possible, and be willing to “go without” if the money is not available, comparing it to decisions households must make in their own budgets.

Josh Daley - Mr. Daley shared his support of adequately funding the schools, acknowledging that while he, like others, feels the current financial “pinch” as a small business owner and taxpayer, he is willing to pay higher taxes to sustain quality education. He urged the council and school committee not to frame the issue as a moral battle, but instead to work collaboratively to solve a complex problem that has built up over multiple years. Josh emphasized the need to “find ways” within existing constraints—including being creative with budgeting and revenue strategies—to ensure the schools receive the resources they reasonably need, reiterating that the central priority should be maintaining strong public education in South Kingstown.

Jim O’Neil - Mr. O’Neil expressed disappointment that the budget presentation did not sufficiently address the \$150 million high school bond and its principal and interest costs. He argued that the district should retain the nine staff reductions already identified, and instead look at administrative costs, suggesting that reducing some of the approximately 16 administrators (whom he estimated average around \$150,000 with benefits) and replacing them with classroom teachers could both save money and improve instruction. He proposed eliminating Social Security contributions for employees who already receive a state pension, claiming this could save \$1.5–\$2 million, and recommended not spending additional money on capital projects beyond the high school, since the Curtis Corner demolition could lower the overall project cost. Jim also raised broader revenue ideas, including creating a separate tax category for short-term rentals / income-producing properties in this “eco-tourism, college town,” and reiterated his long-standing view that bringing charter/choice students back into district schools would create substantial savings due to economies of scale, which he estimated could be around \$5 million if all such students returned.

Brett Harrington - Mr. Harrington stressed concerns about the long-term sustainability of raising the school appropriation by \$2.5M, noting that once this becomes the new “floor,” state maintenance-of-effort rules and contract structures make it very difficult to reduce in future years. He questioned why, given that South Kingstown has faced state aid issues for more than a decade, there has not been more aggressive, earlier advocacy with legislators and the governor. Brett highlighted that collective bargaining rules and Evergreen contracts leave taxpayers with few effective tools to control costs and argued that taxpayers need stronger representation at the bargaining table. He also pointed to declining high school enrollment relative to past years and urged that both staffing and facilities plans reflect that reality. Finally, he warned that fully funding both the operating increase and the new high school debt service could leave the town with no capacity to provide tax relief (especially for struggling seniors) or to respond to future financial pressures.

Dorald Beasley - Mr. Beasley noted that despite South Kingstown repeatedly setting a goal of having five-star schools, current RIDE accountability data show only three 3-star schools and two 4-star schools, with overall ratings held back largely by achievement and graduation outcomes for students with disabilities. He highlighted that SK spends an exceptionally high amount per special education student—about \$166,776 per pupil, the second highest in the state—yet is not seeing commensurate results, and also cited SK’s overall per-pupil cost (around \$31K per student if the requested increase is granted), which would be among the highest in Rhode Island. Beasley argued that the council has consistently chosen not to reduce the property tax transfer to the schools even when per-pupil analysis suggested it could, and urged more scrutiny of spending and outcomes. Looking ahead, he questioned how the new high school—designed for 728 students, with a theoretical capacity near 786—will be utilized when NESDEC projections show only about 436 SK high-schoolers in ten years, suggesting the district may eventually need to reconfigure grades (e.g., move 7–8 into the building) or consider regionalization with neighboring towns to fully use the space and control costs.

Laura Erban - Ms. Erban shared her support of investing in the schools and urged the council to view the budget as part of one unified town system, not “schools versus municipal.” She noted that voters overwhelmingly rejected a school budget cut referendum in 2023 but approved the \$150M high school bond in 2024, which she sees as a clear signal that the community values education and is willing to pay for it. Laura described real facility issues her own children experience—such as leaking roofs and heat outages at West Kingston and Broad Rock—arguing these are visible signs that the system is already strained. While acknowledging she feels the same financial pressures as other taxpayers, she stressed that South Kingstown’s “community wealth” is reflected not just in property values but in its commitment to public education, and warned that failing to adequately fund the district could drive families away and harm the town’s long-term vitality. She closed by calling for creative, collaborative solutions that allow the town to both support strong schools and maintain a robust, equitable community.

Elizabeth Nestor - Ms. Nestor is in support of the school budget and continued investment in education. A long-time resident and frequent meeting attendee, she identified herself as a retiree with no children in the schools who nonetheless consistently supports school funding. Libby explained that she intends to live in South Kingstown for the rest of her life and wants the community’s children to have educational opportunities as strong as those she received, regardless of whether current voters have school-aged children. She framed support for the budget as a matter of community responsibility and intergenerational equity, emphasizing that a high-quality public school system benefits the whole town, not just current families with students.

Mr. McEntee closed public comment.

Mr. McEntee thanked the school administration for a thorough, detailed budget presentation and the School Committee for its collaborative approach, reiterating that the Town Council views schools as the “heart of the community” and is committed to supporting education. He explained the next steps in the budget process: the Town Council would meet the following evening at 7:00 PM to adopt a preliminary

budget, followed by public hearings in April and a final budget adoption later in April, when adjustments could still be made based on updated information (e.g., state aid, negotiations, reimbursements). He encouraged everyone to stay engaged and informed throughout this process and closed by again expressing appreciation for the time and effort of all participants.

4. Adjournment

The meeting was ended by President McEntee.

THERE WERE NO VOTES TAKEN IN THIS MEETING.