

Groton-Dunstable Regional School District
Frequently Asked Questions
FY08 Budget
(Revised 5/11/07)

1: How much is the school district budget next year?

The school's operating budget for next year (Fiscal Year 2008) is \$30,403,954. This is an increase of approximately \$2,600,000 from the current (FY07) budget.

2: What are the biggest increased expenses in the budget?

Health insurance increases, salaries for district employees, retirement and transportation expense increases are major factors to the increase in our expenditure budget—these items alone increase the budget by approximately \$1.3 million. The school district is also trying to provide additional resources to improve our math performance, to maintain class size, and to properly maintain our buildings and technology investment. These initiatives will cost us approximately \$500,000.

3: How does the budget reflect the short term and long term vision of growth and sustainability for the district?

The FY08 budget is built on the guiding principle of improving student achievement. The recommendations for the budget come from a data driven process that includes student enrollment, student performance metrics (including MCAS scores), and industry standards. Our capital maintenance plan is based on a five-year forecast of needs, and our technology infrastructure plan is based on a similar model of sustainability.

4: Why is an override being requested?

One of the primary reasons that an override is requested this year is insufficient state aid. In September we learned that the Department of Education recently recalculated its aid formula, and based on the perceived wealth of Groton and Dunstable, the state is shifting the cost burden to both towns. Even though Chapter 70 aid went up slightly this year, there is a shortfall of approximately \$760,000 from what we anticipated would come to the district based on historical funding patterns. This loss of revenue combined with the increases in our fixed operating costs necessitates an override of proposition 2 ½.

5: What is the total size of the override?

The total amount needed from both Groton and Dunstable is \$1,216,518. Groton's share of this amount, based on enrollment of Groton students, is \$937,570. Dunstable's share of this amount is \$278,948.

6. How much will the override cost me in terms of taxes?

The impact on the real estate taxes in Dunstable is estimated to be \$.54 per \$1,000. For a home assessed at \$400,000, the impact would be \$216.

The impact on the real estate taxes in Groton is estimated to be \$.58 per \$1,000 of home value. For a home assessed at \$400,000, the impact would be \$232.

7: Is it possible to approve only part of the override?

No. The override measure may not be modified after April 17, the deadline for printing the election ballots. Voters must approve or reject the entire amount.

8: What is the process for approving the override?

At each town's annual meeting (Groton – April 30th, Dunstable – May 14th), the school budget will come before voters for approval. Residents will be asked to approve the school budget at Town Meeting. Voters will then need to pass a ballot measure at the spring town election (Groton- May 22nd, Dunstable – May 21st). Both votes must pass for the override to be approved, and the override needs to pass in both towns.

9: What happens if only one town approves the override?

If one town approves the override and the other town does not, the school committee will revisit their budget and has 30 days to ask the town that did not approve the override to approve the same number or a lower number. If the town still does not approve the requested amount the school committee can then call for a joint Town Meeting to determine a budget.

10: What will be cut if the override fails?

There is a published list of reductions developed by school administrators. To reduce the budget by \$1.2 million, we would need to reduce teaching staff, aides, guidance services, and other expenses. Approximately 17 existing positions would be eliminated, and the five new positions being proposed would not be filled.

11: What can residents do to support the budget before Town Meeting and the ballot vote?

Residents should help raise awareness by talking with friends and neighbors. Writing a letter to the editor of the local papers will also help raise awareness.

12: The override will create financial difficulty for some, especially those on fixed income. Why should they support the override?

The school district is aware of the burden that this places on some. No one enjoys feeling forced to choose between the needs of our students and the financial strain on seniors or those on limited income. The school district has worked very hard to deliver quality educational services, and we need the support of our community to maintain those services.

13: If the District saw this reduction in state aid coming down the pike years ago, why didn't you do more to reduce spending? Given that state aid is not likely to increase significantly in the near future, what plans are there to ensure that the District will not be seeking an override in 2008, 2009?

The district did expect that changes would be made to the foundation formula to more accurately reflect school district expenditures such as healthcare. However, we learned in September that the state was planning to revise the split between the state and communities over a 5 year period. This was in the exploratory stages and was not finalized until later.

The school district has been sensitive to costs driving our budget for several years. We have put cost saving plans in place (such as energy conservation), and we closely monitor these plans. During the last teacher negotiation, a significant effort went into identifying ways to manage healthcare costs and limit the skyrocketing premium increases.

GDRSD believes in its staff and works to hire and retain quality employees. Appropriate financial incentive is certainly part of this effort, but we also recognize that working in our community with new school facilities and an active, supportive parent network contributes to a desirable workplace. We perform regular market analysis of our pay structure, and we strive to be competitive in the workplace without being the highest paying employer in our area. In our last negotiation, we were able to address healthcare cost containment while offering an 8.75% raise over 3 years, slightly behind the 9-10% average raises being offered in other districts.

By comparison, the Boston Globe recently ranked our average teacher salary 251st out of 325 school districts (www.boston.com/news/special/inside_our_schools/grotondunstable.htm) based on most recent comparable data available. Other statistics compare favorably as well. In short, GDRSD provides good value based on above average test scores and college placement with average costs.

If the communities do not support the budget needs of our school district based on the services currently being provided, a restructuring exercise will be necessary, and it will include a significant decrease in the types of services provided.

14: What are you doing about the math issue? Are you planning on adding math specialists?

If approved, the FY08 budget includes money for additional math specialist support at the elementary and middle school levels. The proposed FY08 budget includes additional math specialist time at the following schools: half time (.5) at the middle school, .3 at Florence Roche, .2 at Prescott, and .2 at Swallow Union, equaling a total full time equivalent (FTE) of 1.2 math specialists. If the override fails, the budget will include a .17 FTE math specialist at the middle school and .2 math specialist at the elementary level, both of which would be added time to existing part time staff.

15: Why do we need math specialists?

The district needs increased math specialist support because over the past 5 years MCAS mathematics performance in the elementary and middle school grades has been either inconsistent or decreasing. In 2006, levels of proficiency ranged from a high of 70% in grade 6 to a low of 56% in grade 3. In addition, the district's special education students lag behind other students, not making the expected adequate yearly progress as defined by the No Child Left Behind law. After analyzing data and determining some of the contributing factors to the unsatisfactory results, the district determined that there is a need to increase the capacity within our teaching staff to help all students succeed in mathematics, especially since elementary teachers and some middle school teachers are trained as generalists and teach multiple content areas. Current research around best practices of effective schools shows that building capacity through professional development, coaching, and providing specific feedback helps to improve instruction.

16: What does a math specialist actually do?

Typically a math specialist provides both student and teacher support to improve mathematics teaching and learning. Responsibilities include providing direct intervention and instructional services for students as well as coaching support and feedback to teachers. They also model effective teaching practices by conducting demonstration or collaborative lessons. They supplement classroom teaching efforts by providing appropriate resources. They assist teachers in developing effective lesson plans that both address students' identified needs and align with state and local standards. They also assist teachers in using formal and informal, ongoing assessment data to drive instruction. They assist teachers and school-based teams in developing individual learning plans for identified students, as needed. Finally, they serve as a resource to other educators, parents and the community

17. Why did the School Committee cut the budget by \$350,000 if the original budget represented the "must have" amount?

The school committee is seeking to provide needed services to our students. To do this, we must successfully pass the budget. Although town officials have not expressed specific objections to the detailed budget proposal provided, they have indicated that they could not support an override of the magnitude indicated by our original vote. In an effort to gain the support of our officials and successfully pass this override, school administrators recommended a list of cuts totaling \$350,000, and the school committee unanimously voted to accept those cuts and approve a lower budget.

18: What efforts have been made to save money on healthcare costs?

Every year the school district utilizes a professional healthcare broker to prepare a competitive bid to seek the lowest possible healthcare premiums. Last year, that effort included joining a cooperative healthcare program. Although the district did not join this cooperative, through a competitive bidding process the district saved over \$500,000. Our teacher's association has worked very closely with the school administration to explore ways to help contain cost premiums by better utilizing services such as prescription fulfillment by mail order.

19: What can be done to help reduce the expenses in the budget (recycling, lowering energy usage, etc.)?

The school district has been actively looking for cost reduction ideas, and we are certainly open to new ideas. Energy conservation and recycling are already established areas of focus, with principals leading the effort at each school with the help of our director of business and finance. The district is putting its liability insurance out to bid, looking to consolidate contracts for copier machines, exploring ways to reduce advertising costs, exploring the opportunity to outsource our special education transportation, to mention a few.

20: What kind of restructuring could be done in the district to save money? (change/eliminate school vacations, restructure school building use, etc.)?

The school district has engaged in a number of programs to save money. We have not explored “fundamental” changes to our services, so it is unclear what savings may be obtained by trying to eliminate a school vacation or close any current school building.

21: Are you planning on cutting aides at the schools? We can't cut the aides at any of the schools especially Boutwell. That will interfere with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Those children especially need the one on one aide. The teachers absolutely can not handle all the paperwork and the Special Education (Sped) kids with out aides.

There are no plans to cut aides within the schools unless the override fails. Without the override, the school district will need to make significant personnel cuts, including building aides, teachers, and staff. We agree with the observation that this would create significant hardship in a number of areas, but the only way to avoid this is to pass the override. The district will continue to provide necessary resources identified in student IEPs.

22: How can we get involved with the state aid issue? Write to the Massachusetts Legislature (or point us in the right direction)?

It is important for residents to understand the state aid issue, and contacting your elected officials is a good idea. Our state representative is Robert Hargraves, phone 617-722-2305, and our state senator is Steven Panagiotakos, phone 617-722-1630.

23: Should the school district abandon programs that clearly are not embraced by the public?

Different school programs have both supporters and detractors, and it is not always easy to determine exactly which programs may or may not be “embraced” by the community. Our math curriculum, block scheduling at the high school, and physical education time in elementary schools are all areas that have been criticized recently, as have the addition of sports programs. The school administration is committed to engaging in thoughtful discussions on all concerns in an effort to provide appropriate services that are supported by our communities.

24: What could we do as a community to help raise money to supplement the budget? Could there be a committee that could be formed to look into that?

There are ways to support the GDRSD beyond voting to support our budget. A number of organizations help the district or specific schools. Each PTA, for example, provides resources to their respective schools that enhance the services provided by our professional staff. The athletic boosters provide supplemental support for our athletic program. Project specific fundraisers also arise if a particular need extends beyond the means of our budget (such as the Florence Roche and Prescott school playground fundraising efforts). Another wonderful example in our district is the Groton-Dunstable Education Foundation (GDEF), which raises funds and awards grants to supply teachers and schools with equipment or new curriculum materials. Participation in any of these organizations would help benefit the district.

25: What is the plan for improving the air quality at Prescott? Is there money in the FY08 budget for this? If not, why?

We have been working on a multi-phase strategy to address the CO2 issues at Prescott. We continue to monitor the CO2 levels within the school while we consider the options presented to us in a recent engineering report. Based on the expense of providing full HVAC capability to Prescott, this funding cannot be obtained within the operating budget of the school district, and the school committee is looking into alternative funding options. Up to date information about the Prescott air quality issue can be found on the district's Web site (www.GDRSD.org)

26: Is football included in this budget?

Varsity football next year will be cooperative with Ayer, similar to past years. The athletic director, in cooperation with other school administrators and the superintendent, has been working to best determine when to begin the transition of football from a cooperative sport with Ayer to a stand-alone sport here at GDRSD. The current plan is for JV football to become a Groton-Dunstable (GD) team outside of the cooperative relationship next year. Varsity football would become a solely GD team in two years (FY09).

The school committee reduced the athletic budget by \$26,000 as a result of its vote on April 4. The athletic director has indicated that he will be able to offer JV football and indoor track next year based on the current budget. If the override fails, no new sports will be added, and there will be a reduction in the current sports offerings.

27: Will sports opportunities at the middle school level be reduced in order to free up the resources necessary to start the football program at the high school next fall?

No.

28: Why are we adding athletics programs to the high school?

We are adding athletics programs at the high school because with the increased enrollment over the last ten years we have not continued to keep pace with offering comparable amounts of student athlete interscholastic opportunities. Compared to the Midland-Wachusett B League schools and other similarly sized schools, GDRHS only offers 21 programs compared to the average of 24.4. We offer 6 less programs than the largest school in our league.

29: Why are you offering Football and Indoor Track next year and not other programs?

We plan to offer football for the following reasons:

- GDRHS student athlete interest results
- 36 participants in a Co-Op program (19 Freshmen)
- One of the largest youth football programs in CMASS
- Expect to generate revenue for the athletics department
- Start program with existing facilities

We plan to offer Boys and Girls Indoor Track for the following reasons:

- GDRHS student athlete interest results
- Only school out of 19 Midland Wachusett League Divisions A, B, C not to offer a winter indoor track program
- Current facilities for practices are adequate
- Only offer 160 opportunities for student athletes in winter season compared to 275+ in the fall and spring
- Indoor track offers 50+ opportunities to the GDRHS students
- Minimal start up equipment required
- Completion of a successful intramural indoor track program this past winter

30: What is the long-term cost of football? Will the district be asking taxpayers to pay significantly higher taxes to support a new field, locker rooms, etc. when varsity football begins at GD?

The athletic director has provided the school committee with a forecast of athletic costs over the next three years, including the projected costs for football. Although there are several capital expenditures that would benefit football and other sports, such as an artificial turf field, bigger lockers, etc., the school committee has made it clear that they are not willing to use operating budget funds toward that purpose. Private fundraising efforts have begun to help the start up and long term expenses based on that common understanding.

31: Why not separate the football question from the budget override question? I think the two issues would then be given fair consideration by voters.

Over the past several years, the school committee and school administration have worked to make the budget more transparent. This increase in information naturally creates the desire by some to want to approve each and every line item within the budget. The role of the school committee is to help our administration understand the general desires of the community and allow them to establish services that fits those needs. While it is helpful for citizens to get involved in the budget process when it begins in late November, it does not serve anyone's interests to ask voters to approve each and every line item within the budget.

32: Is it worth jeopardizing the passage of the override just to keep football in the plans?

Part of the GDRSD educational philosophy is to include sports opportunities based on our enrollment. Due to the strain of our budgets over the past five-six years, user fees have provided supplemental funding needed to maintain this philosophy. The school committee has conducted due diligence to ensure that football does not impact the school budget disproportionately. Although the transition of JV football program from Ayer to GD has received some criticism, it is not the cause of the override request. The school committee has never voted to approve the addition of sports, and it would be more appropriate to leave the decision about which sports programs to offer and when to the school administrators.

33: What is the school district's plan for building a new elementary school? Is it dependent on what we do with Prescott?

A Facilities Task Force has been established to update elementary school enrollment projections and evaluate the need for a new elementary school. The length of time that Prescott is utilized as an elementary school will certainly be an important factor to consider. The task force is expected to report back to the school committee in the next few months regarding the need and timeline for new school facilities.

34: How does the high school land eminent domain case affect this year's budget? Where would the money come from to resolve that case?

The eminent domain case is still under appeal. It will have no effect on the school's FY08 operating budget. Both Groton and Dunstable have authorized the borrowing of money to pay for the original finding by the court, but the school district has not bonded this money.

35: How does the per-pupil-expenditure (PPE) in Groton-Dunstable compare to our neighboring towns?

According to the preliminary FY 2006 figures from the Department of Education, Groton-Dunstable spends \$9,640 per pupil. The DOE formula is very complex and does NOT include certain expenses such as transportation and debt service. Here is how we stack up with our neighbors:

Regional Districts

Dover-Sherborn	15,559
Concord-Carlisle	15,424
Manchester-Essex	12,436
Acton-Boxboro	11,176
Nashoba	11,020
Hamilton-Wenham	10,921
Groton-Dunstable	9,640

Geographic Neighbors

Littleton	10,432
Ayer	10,151
Shirley	9,906
Groton-Dunstable	9,640
Tyngsborough	9,338
Westford	8,923
North Middlesex	8,663

You can see that our costs are considerably less than those of other high-performing regional districts in eastern Massachusetts. Looking at our immediate neighbors, Groton-Dunstable is the median. Three towns are slightly higher and three are slightly lower than Groton-Dunstable.

36: How do our teachers' salaries compare to other high performing districts?

An objective of the district is to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. We are competing with neighboring school districts. Our salary schedule is not at the highest or the lowest when compared to other high performing districts. Our analysis of salary schedules shows that the Groton-Dunstable teachers are in the middle of the salary range.