



Questions & Answers from the Salem Public Schools' FY27 Budget Forums

(February 11; February 25, February 26)

Below, please find questions posed by members of the public at the Salem Public Schools' FY27 Budget Forums. (Questions are in gray.)

Q: Student Enrollment: Low income student enrollment is down by 3% - can you speak to whether that is being driven by incoming kids (fewer being low income) or is it that fewer non-low income kids are leaving the district at grade 6 or 9?

A: Probably both. Deeper analysis is required to fully know for certain, but we do know that enrollment at Collins Middle School and Salem High School has grown over the last several years. Salem High School, for example, enrolled 803 students in school year 2021-2022; this year, there are 960 students enrolled, adding 157 students (representing a nearly 20% increase in the number of students enrolled).

Salem's overall enrollment has grown by 224 students since 2021-2022 (a 6% increase).

Q: Non Personnel: The non personnel expense has almost doubled in the last four years. With an expected increase of 19.62% in just the last year. Can you explain?

A: Non Personnel costs have been rising over the last several years, and in some categories, the increases have been steep. In FY23, nonpersonnel expenses were \$12.9 million; in FY26, nonpersonnel expenses are projected to be \$18.6 million.

Some of this is attributable to the way we budget, and whether expenses are charged to the general fund or to a grant. In FY23, for example, some nonpersonnel costs would have been covered by pandemic relief funds (ESSER). So the increase over time reflects more funds being budgeted to the general fund and not grants.

Another example: The costs for transporting for students who are experiencing homelessness has increased dramatically. While Salem hosted a migrant shelter, the numbers of students experiencing homelessness increased rapidly and the Salem Public Schools received supplemental funds from the Commonwealth for each student sheltered

there. So even though the numbers of students and the costs of transporting them both increased, the supplemental funding allowed SPS to keep the budget lower (in FY24 & FY25) than our actual costs (since those supplemental grant funds were offsetting the expenses. In FY26, with the shelter funds no longer available to SPS, the budget for transporting students experiencing homelessness increased by 46%.

Looking ahead to FY27, the cost for transporting students experiencing homelessness is projected to increase by ~3%. This is lower than was originally projected and that smaller increase is attributable to the fact that the number of families experiencing homelessness is stabilizing and/or decreasing, and we have secured new vendors to provide this transportation at what is expected to be a more favorable rate.

Q: Carlton Move: Can you speak to the costs of moving the Carlton kids and staff to Lafayette Street (moving expenses, etc) and also whether there will be any immediately recognized (this year) cost savings from vacating that building?

A: We are planning for the following move related costs: moving supplies (boxes, labels, tape, dumpsters); paid packing time for staff; and the costs of movers for the furniture and technology. We anticipate those costs will be roughly \$35,000. The packing supplies and staff time will be paid from the current fiscal year's budget. The cost of the movers will be a cost for FY27.

We expect to realize savings by moving New Liberty Innovation School and Salem Prep into the Carlton building. This means we will not have to pay over \$300,000 in rent to house those schools at the Witch City Mall.

In addition, merging two schools will allow us to concentrate resources and reduce the overall number of positions needed to serve all students.

Q: Elementary Reconfiguration: Is there an estimated cost savings from the elementary schools consolidation?

A: The analysis conducted during the elementary school reconfiguration estimated that the savings would be approximately \$1.3 million. As we finalize our budget proposal, the savings appear to be over \$1.6 million, which includes the additional savings realized from moving New Liberty Innovation School and Salem Prep to Carlton.

Q: Position Eliminations: How many vacant positions will be eliminated? How many in schools v. central office?

A: As in previous years, we will prioritize vacant positions in the case of position reductions. There are at least two known position eliminations of vacant positions. Both are centrally budgeted positions that support schools. More information will be made available once the final budget proposal is completed.

Q: When will staff be told that their positions are being eliminated?

A: By the end of March.

Q: Elementary Reconfiguration: What is the thought for the specialty roles for Sarah Parker Remond? Additional student supports, or something else?

A: The Sarah Parker Remond school will have extra instructional core staff. The initial proposal is to add 2 additional math interventionists as well as an Associate Principal position. The Associate Principal role will add a seasoned administrator who has been a Principal to the leadership team.

Q: Long Term Planning: Is there any discussion for more long-term planning / investment that would help reduce non-personnel costs like electricity? For example, a shade structure with solar panels (like the one at Beverly HS) as part of the SHS new building or other schools with sunlit parking?

A: We are working closely with the city to reduce our costs, and our energy consumption. The new high school is expected to be "net zero" and should reduce our utilities costs dramatically, while helping the city of Salem achieve its sustainability goals.

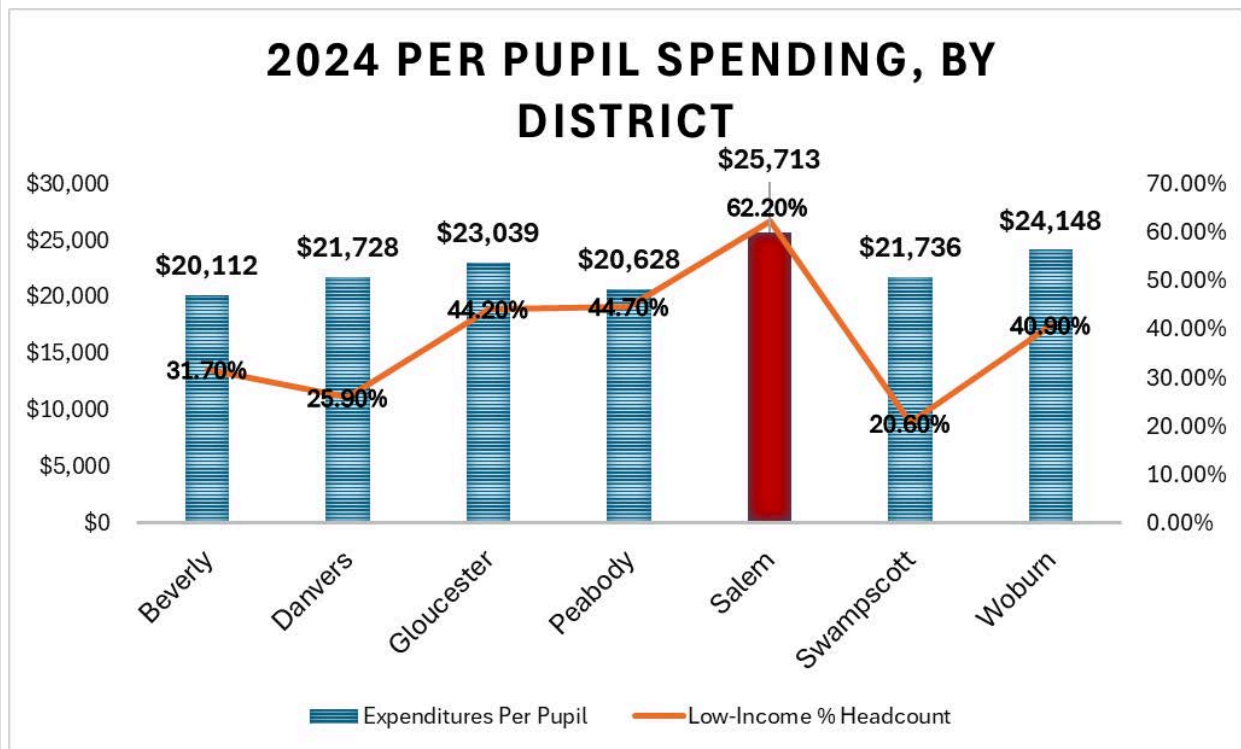
(In terms of this specific example, the new high school is scheduled to get a similar solar canopy as the one from Beverly referenced in the question.)

Q: Funding: Not sure if you can answer this, but how does SPS's funding from the city

compare to other similar cities/towns? Not in terms of growth, but in terms of the % of the overall city budget.

A: This is a complicated question. A quick look at the municipal budgets and school budgets from neighboring communities shows a wide range in terms of the percentage the schools make up of their city's total budget. However, it isn't an apples-to-apples comparison because different communities include different expenses within their school budget. (For example, it is common for schools to have employee health insurance as part of their budget. In Salem, school employee health insurance is budgeted to the city, and does not appear in the school budget.)

One way to look at this is to compare per pupil spending by school district. Below is a selection of nearby communities and their per pupil spending in 2024 (the most recent year for which comparison data is available). The orange horizontal line represents low income student enrollment, and the vertical bars represent total per pupil spending. Salem (in red) has the highest per pupil spending, and also the highest percentage of low income students.



Another way to look at this question is to consider what percentage of the school budget

each community is estimated to be able to contribute according to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. See below for a selection of communities whose student enrollment is similar to Salem's. The **Required Local Contribution** is the amount that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) estimates communities can contribute to their school budget, and the **Required Local Contribution as a % of the total budget** shows what percentage of the overall budget DESE estimates each community can pay. Shaded in gray is Salem: DESE estimates that the community is able to directly fund nearly 61% of the district budget.

FY27 Chapter 70 district summary

District	Required Local Contribution	Required Local Contribution as a % of the budget
Beverly	\$53,954,926	80%
Danvers	\$37,812,993	83%
Gloucester	\$41,501,767	79%
Peabody	\$62,683,035	62%
Salem	\$51,401,175	61%
Swampscott	\$23,020,797	79%
Woburn	\$62,326,740	83%

Q: **Long Term Financial picture:** Are you able to speak to the longer term financial picture for the district? We often hear about structural defects and it's not clear how sustainable this year's budget solves will be. Many families have concerns about further mergers / cuts in the future and it would be helpful to understand your assessment of the longer term (next ~5 years) financial picture and strategy

A: At this time, we have not conducted 5 year financial projections. There are still many unknowns, including:

- **Unknown collective bargaining agreements:** The vast majority of SPS employees are members of a union, and the largest union by far is the Salem Teachers Union (which represents nearly 2/3rds of employees). The STU contracts for both the teacher unit and Paraprofessional & School Related Personnel (PSRP) unit are only current through the end of the next school year. Without a sense of the costs in the next collective bargaining agreement, it is challenging to speculate on the largest cost in our budget.
- **CH70 changes:** Over the last school year, The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has conducted a listening tour for districts. Many districts have come forward to report that the funding formula does not fully cover the true costs that school districts are facing- especially relating to rising personnel costs, and rising costs for employee insurance, student transportation, and utility costs for heating and cooling. It is hoped that the legislature will address the challenges to the formula so that as Massachusetts' student enrollment changes, municipalities have adequate funding for their school buildings.

While these factors make it challenging to create accurate long term budget predictions, we believe we are taking steps toward financial stability. Merging the two elementary schools will help to consolidate resources.

We hope to do more analysis of this question during the summer of 2026.

Q: **Subscriptions:** Can you share more details about the costs of subscriptions and length of contracts with the respective vendors? Between Aspen, Parentsquare, Jumprope, Stopfinder, STmath, Raptor, Schoolcafe, and at least a few others, what cost savings could result from simplifying this portfolio?

A: We have software subscriptions for multiple purposes: Human Resources infrastructure, curriculum, staff attendance, Special Education administration, school bus routing, school lunch menu planning, facilities events and work orders, etc. Generally our subscriptions are one year with a few exceptions (e.g. Google, PowerSchool, School Cafe).

Together these subscriptions total \$1 million, which is funded by grants and the general

fund. The portion of the software subscriptions on the general fund is less than 1% of the total budget.

Periodically, we review our software subscriptions to ensure it is continuing to meet our needs. When looking for a new software platform, our Instructional Technology team pulls together a diverse committee of stakeholders to participate in vendor demonstrations. We also review pricing and the reviews from other school districts.

When considering whether to drop a software subscription, we review the analytics to see whether the software is being used. (For example, when we analyzed usage of Lexia Power UP- 6-12 ELA practice- we realized we could drop that subscription because it wasn't being used.) We also consider stakeholder input on the effectiveness of the software and whether there is a new software or platform that can more efficiently meet our needs. Whenever we can combine subscriptions to streamline costs and platforms, we seek to do so.

Q: Teacher Engagement: Has the district engaged with teachers and staff - and not just school leadership - to ask their opinions? If so, can anything be shared about what SPS staff are saying/feeling about these questions?

A: On February 26, the district hosted an online forum for staff, which was attended by over 40 attendees. In addition, the Superintendent engaged his Teacher Advisory Group and solicited their feedback.

Q: Technology Selections: When we select and use technology, have we looked at the research on its effectiveness?

A: Yes. We also review the experience of other districts and the pricing.

Q: Tech. Subscriptions: I echo the question before about budget impacts of tech subscriptions. Raptor specifically is the first thing I'd be willing to cut. At a time when federal agencies are targeting immigrant families through digital databases, it feels gross that SPS is asking caregivers to give their personal identifying info to a third party just to enter a building.

A: Thank you for the feedback. We adopted the Raptor system after a comprehensive security audit while working with a security expert who strongly recommended that Salem adopt a visitor management system. Raptor helps us to ensure the safety of students and staff in the building. We do not share information with federal agencies or the Salem Police.

Q: **Parent Advocacy** I think it would be helpful for the district to have a well organized process to get families to advocate for things that the district needs - CH70 is a really good example. Same if there are other areas of advocacy where caregiver voices could help. I agree with what another parent said about SPS already having a very lean staff and there not being in-school positions to cut without impacts for students. I personally wish I had known about the chapter 70 issue earlier so I had more time to help advocate with other families

A: Thank you for this idea. We are reviewing our communication strategies so that families, residents and all Salem stakeholders have a deep understanding of the district's practices and infrastructure. It's critically important that our partners understand our funding as well as the policies that shape the work that we do.

Q: **The High School Building Project:** Many buildings in Salem are far older than the high school- famously so, in many cases. It seems odd that a major public investment (built in the 1970s, renovated in the 1990s) is in such dire need of a major overhaul or possible replacement. Is it common for cities to replace high schools of similar age, especially in a budget climate that has prompted decisions to cut staff two years in a row and close an elementary school?

A: Salem High School is not the oldest building in the school district. However, there are compelling reasons the district applied for, and was accepted into the MSBA program. The Heated and Cooling systems do not work in all parts of the building, the electrical system struggles to meet the demands of a 21st century technology infrastructure, and there are leaks in the building that make some parts of the building unusable.

It is not uncommon for school districts to renovate and maintain older, and perhaps sturdier, older buildings. In the years since the high school was last renovated, a number of other schools, including the Collins Middle School have been renovated and are able to

provide more spaces that are better suited to modern learning. As part of the high school building project, we explored whether to renovate or rebuild; the size of the high school and the level of renovation that would be needed, made building a new high school a more affordable option.

The public is invited to tour Salem High School on Sunday, March 29 as part of an open house.

Q: Parent Communication: Last piece of feedback: it would be great to let parents newly entering SPS know how/where to learn more about the budget process. I have young kids and didn't know anything about the budget process before elementary reconfig. Maybe there's a way to give some basic info to parents (even on a one page handout) during elementary school orientation or other major transition points

A: We are considering the ways in which we communicate about our budgeting. An idea we heard at a Budget Forum was to think about ways to preview for parents what is happening in the next level of schooling (e.g. help elementary parents learn more about middle school, and middle school parents learn more about high school). We look forward to thinking about ways that we can introduce the process to families before it starts for next year and will be considering all suggestions, like the one-page document idea shared in the question.

Q: School Budgets and Districtwide Supports Your slides show that 66% of the budget typically is budgeted directly to schools, and the other 34% is budgeted to "Districtwide Supports". What does that mean? What is included in Districtwide Supports?

A: Below, please see the budgets included in "Districtwide Supports": expenses that support schools but are not budgeted to them. The largest of those budgets is Special Education, whose budget includes the out-of-district tuitions for students who are best served outside of the district. Second to that is the Facilities budget, which includes the cost for all custodians, as well as utilities and maintenance costs. Student Supports includes costs related to students' healthy development, and a large cost within that cost center is transportation for students experiencing homelessness.

Departments	Personnel	Expenses	TOTAL
Special Ed	\$1,789,751.33	\$6,975,943.00	\$8,765,694.33
IT	\$861,807.99	\$520,000.00	\$1,381,807.99
Public Relations	\$119,575.90	\$26,000.00	\$145,575.90
Human Resources	\$360,066.90	\$33,500.00	\$393,566.90
Health	\$322,263.62	\$45,250.00	\$367,513.62
Student Supports	\$501,210.26	\$1,326,804.00	\$1,828,014.26
DEIE	\$401,668.34	\$217,000.00	\$618,668.34
Multi-Language	\$579,986.79	\$54,394.00	\$634,380.79
Facilities	\$2,753,329.49	\$3,329,941.00	\$6,083,270.49
Asst Sup.	\$275,913.88	\$61,500.00	\$337,413.88
OST	\$99,822.91	\$194,500.00	\$294,322.91
School Com.	\$72,000.00	\$8,500.00	\$80,500.00
Transportation	\$199,323.85	\$1,385,000.00	\$1,584,323.85
Supp	\$302,323.00	\$68,500.00	\$370,823.00
Teaching & Learning	\$1,108,947.76	\$451,085.00	\$1,560,032.76
Business Office	\$556,828.95	\$60,000.00	\$616,828.95
Central Office	\$58,594.80	\$300,600.00	\$359,194.80