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Stamford superintendent requests 6.5% budget hike

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Superintendent of Stamford Public Schools Dr. Tamu Lucero poses in her office with the 2020-2021 budget proposal at the Government Center in Stamford, Conn. Tuesday, Jan. 14, 2020.

Photo: Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

STAMFORD — Rising cuts in health insurance, special education, building maintenance and transportation are driving the superintendent of schools' call for a 6.52 percent increase in the school budget for next year.

“When your health care goes up \$5 million dollars, when your transportation costs go up almost \$2 million dollars, when your facilities costs go up \$3.3 million dollars, and your

Lucero's requested amount of \$301.54 million will likely represent over half of the city's total budget, as has been the case in the past two years, when the budget increases have been about 2 percent.

Increases in the State Partnership health insurance plan alone add more than \$4.4 million to the school costs, itself a 3.1 percent rise over this year. For special education, "out-of-district tuition costs continue to grow at a rate of more than double that of the overall budget increase," Lucero wrote in the executive summary for her proposed budget.

Proposed Growth and Reallocations

Proposed Growth Areas	2020-2021	2019-2020	Difference
Health Care	\$37,036,376*	\$31,707,490	\$5,328,886
Transportation	\$22,969,650	\$21,052,141	\$1,917,509
Facilities	\$25,148,164	\$21,815,575	\$3,332,589
Special Education	\$50,845,649	\$44,636,016	\$6,209,633

*Does not include new employees.

Rising costs in health insurance, special education, building maintenance and transportation are driving the superintendent of schools' call for a 6.52 percent increase in the school budget for next year.

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The need for a contingency budget mechanism to address fluctuating needs is another reason Lucero said the budget ask is higher this year.

In past years, the district has used other funding sources, such as food service revenue, building-use funds and healthcare reserves to cover budget shortfalls.

"Unfortunately, the reality for the 2020-21 budget is that these sources will no longer be available, as they have steadily declined over the years or are completely depleted," wrote Lucero.

Exponentially higher enrollment is one fluctuating need that arose this school year. In total, the district gained 411 more students than the projected 159, a growth expected to

“Considering the city’s growth, and in anticipation that this year’s increase of more than 400 is more of a trend than an anomaly, we are requesting a greater than normal number of contingency positions,” which the budget says will cost a little more than \$1 million, the superintendent said.

Board of Education President Andy George said the increase is long overdue, noting past increases of about 2 percent have been “barely enough” to keep pace with rising costs. “Being under 2 percent was in a sense cutting things to the bone,” said George.

The budget is not all growth, however, as Lucero is also recommending reductions. The biggest proposed cut – \$1,125,000, is for a reduction of about 25 instructional para-educators, or “paras,” mainly media paras who assist each school’s media specialist.

In turn, Lucero hopes to move the instructional paras to open positions for special education paras. The district has 19 vacancies for special education paras, part of a teacher shortage the district faces in certain subjects, including special education.

“I’m questioning whether or not we’ve saturated the market with paras,” said Lucero, adding, “When we have openings for instructional paras, they’re rarely open, but there are quite a few openings on a regular basis for our SPED paras, and because of that we have to figure out how we can reduce the amount of para openings that we have,” said Lucero.

Diane Phanos, president of the Stamford Education Association teachers union, said the SEA is against any reductions to media paras or any other teaching positions.

“Tamu is looking at it as a costs savings, but I think the loss of paras will have a devastating impact on the functioning of school media centers,” said Phanos.

Lucero also plans to eliminate three Individualized Education Program compliance teachers and transition the responsibility for crafting IEPs over to school principals and assistant principals.

Despite the loss of certain positions, Lucero said she doesn’t expect any current district employees will not have a job in the district next year because of the reductions.



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Reductions will also come from a yet unannounced redesign of central office, Lucero said.

The board will hold several special budget presentations to finalize the proposed budget over the next few weeks.

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