

Superintendent: we need to inspire support for education

Levis says he'll continue to push for initial funding request

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COVENTRY — Before a crowd of hundreds in the auditorium at Coventry High School, Superintendent Craig Levis said during Thursday's school committee meeting that he would continue to advocate for the \$73.7 million budget that last week was rejected by voters, and he encouraged others to do the same.

"We need to really inspire this community to support education," Levis said Thursday, adding that the results of level funding would be "catastrophic."

"To me, catastrophic is something that's hard to rebound from," he continued. "We cannot allow that to happen."

Facing significant expenditure increases in the FY20 budget, Levis and Sarah Mangiarelli, the school district's finance director, have remained adamant that their requested funding is necessary to run the schools properly.

"I have said multiple times that I would not stand before you and recommend a different budget, because in my heart of hearts I don't think we can afford a different budget," Mangiarelli said Thursday.

Mangiarelli added that she's "confident that the school system cannot operate the way it's operating on anything less" than its initially proposed budget, which would require a \$1.46 million increase in appropriations from taxes.

Levis added that during a meeting Thursday morning with Interim Town Manager Ed Warzycha, he and Mangiarelli reiterated the importance of receiving the funding that had been factored into the budget turned down by voters.

"I still am trying to wrap my head around how this could happen. And yet, we do have another bite at the apple," Levis said, adding that the district and town this year have worked closely and both seem to agree that funding the school district is "in the best interest of the community."

Levis added that the three funding options presented Wednesday by Warzycha—one that would cut \$600,000 to the schools, another



Photo by Kendra Gravelle

Ava LaFountain, a fifth-grader at Washington Oak Elementary School, was the first to speak during public comment at Thursday's school committee meeting. She was one of many students to speak up regarding the proposed cuts to the school district.

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that would cut \$1 million and a third that would level fund the district, cutting more than \$1.4 million from its request—are “not what’s in the best interest of Coventry Public Schools.”

Levis has said repeatedly that the district “could not function” with level funding from local appropriations.

Yet, considering just 3 percent of Coventry’s eligible voters last week voted in support of the budget, Levis added that level funding is a possibility. And if that does happen, he said, the high school will face a “serious reduction” in athletics, cuts to middle and high school extracurricular activities—including drama, team clubs and band—and a kindergarten teacher may need to be cut.

Level funding would also mean educational program restructuring, which may include double sessions and a major reduction in course offerings.

“This is the killer,” Levis said. “We’ve already talked about eliminating a lot of the things that keep kids in school. These are all things that are true possibilities if the budget doesn’t pass... this could be our reality.”

Levis said the district is also facing additional expenditure increases as a result of the budget situation. In the last week, for example, some 14 students have submitted applications to attend out-of-district career and technical programs, which will cost the district nearly \$16,000 per student.

One at a time, community members stood Thursday to express their support for funding the school district’s request.

The first to grab the mic was Ava LaFountain, a fifth-grade student at Washington Oak Elementary School. She shared her disappointment in last week’s small voter turnout, and pointed out the

ways in which cutting funding for extracurriculars could affect students.

“This is not good, because activities such as cheer, basketball, and so-on and so-forth make us who we are as people,” LaFountain said.

Logan Studley, a 10th grader at Coventry High School, echoed the importance of extracurricular activities in students’ education.

“If it wasn’t for football, I wouldn’t be here as a student,” Studley said, dressed in his varsity letterman jacket.

Studley, who’s also part of the high school’s Navy JROTC program, added that that program has also kept him motivated to maintain good grades.

Resident Bryan Loughlin, meanwhile, spoke about the importance of considering one’s audience while advocating for funding the school district, adding it’s crucial to note the effect inadequate funding could have on things like property values.

“What’s the value to somebody who’s 65 and retired? The big value to them is where they’re living,” Loughlin said. “What the value of their home is, or what the value of their business is.”

School Committee Luke Murray shared a similar sentiment. He said it’s critical that it’s made clear that level funding the schools “doesn’t make economic sense,” and that it will hurt the town both long- and short-term.

“So if you do it for nothing else, do it because it’s a bad deal,” Murray said. “What was presented was a fair budget. You want responsible government? This is what responsible government looks like.”

Murray added that while he’s angry about the current budget situation, he’s also motivated.

“We can get angry—we can get angry and say we weren’t notified, we can talk about the things that weren’t done—but the truth is, we have the opportunity to do things now,” he said. “This is not over. I don’t accept that this is done.”



Photo by Kendra Gravelle

Jason Riley, an eighth-grader at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School, speaks during Thursday’s meeting.

The town council will meet Tuesday in the Coventry High School auditorium to vote on a new budget that will be presented to the public during a second all-day referendum next month.