

WATCHUNG SCHOOLS

Board to budget for new teachers and programs, mold remediation

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EDITOR

WATCHUNG - With a number of new hires made in the last month alone in the grades K-8 school district, Board of Education member James Rhyner explained how the board intends to pay for them.

The board hired what amounts to 4.7 new, full-time employees in August to enhance special education, launch an English as a Second Language (ESL) program, re-introduce world language to grades K-4, and provide increased physical education time.

The hires are just some of the changes introduced by Interim Superintendent Stephanie Bilenker since she took over on July 12.

"We've had quite a bit of change to the educational program going forward that Mrs. Bilenker is bringing, and that we certainly support," Rhyner said at a Wednesday, Sept. 12, board meeting. "Along with those changes, come costs, of course."

The hires cost \$295,403 altogether, according to Interim Business Administrator Ernest Turner.

Rhyner noted the district faces another cost that was unanticipated at budget time: a potential of more than \$400,000 to fund additional out-of-district placements for students with special needs that were unknown to the district last year.

While the board allocates some extra "slack" in the budget every spring,

he said, "this is going to take up pretty much all the slack that we have set aside because it's more dramatic than anything we've ever experienced in the past."

Bilenker noted the district also moved some funding originally intended for teacher training in classroom strategies to fund training in the subject areas of math, reading and writing.

"We're pretty thin right now in terms of any reserve monies for contingencies that arise," said Rhyner, "but that's the state of affairs. It's sometimes how things go in school districts because you just don't know what exactly you're going to be budgeting for in the next year."

Board President Margo Langer thanked Bilenker and district teachers and staff for their work over the summer to introduce new programs and curricula.

"She has worked closely with the administration, the staff and the board to review our programs and systems and we are strongly optimistic about the results going forward," she said of Bilenker.

Mold Remediation

The board will also have to pay to get rid of an unwanted guest.

The presence of mold in at least 15 classrooms at Bayberry School delayed the start of the school year by two full days for Watchung's elementary-schoolers. A remediation company was able to remove the mold over a long weekend, allowing school to start on Tuesday,

Sept. 11.

The project also included safeguards to prevent mold growth in the future.

The district was facing a cost of roughly \$259,000 for the project, Turner said, though he noted the preliminary cost did not include post-testing.

He said the district's insurance coverage includes a \$100,000 deductible, "so at the very least we'll be responsible for \$100,000 of that, and we're still going to have to see just how exactly much we are able to recover through our insurance once it is processed."

The board also voted Wednesday to spend \$5,850 to install wiring for six new dehumidifiers at Bayberry.

All funds related to the mold remediation will come from the district's capital reserves.

Bilenker and teacher representatives from each grade level and the special education program came together to revise the Bayberry School calendar to make up for the late start, board member Georgia Glasser-Nehls said.

After conducting a survey, she said, the group agreed to introduce half-days at Bayberry on Thursday, Oct. 8, and Friday, Oct. 9, two days that were originally scheduled as in-service days for teachers. The teachers will make up for the combined full day of professional development lost by coming in for an in-service day on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in January.

Rearranging the calendar was seen as preferable to ending the school year late, she said.