



A Message from Dr. Alexandra Estrella, Superintendent, Norwalk Public Schools

It is my honor to submit the proposed Norwalk Public Schools budget for the 2021-22 school year, my first budget as your superintendent of schools. While circumstances this year made it especially difficult to establish budget priorities, our proposed budget reflects the following realities:

1. A 25.9% rise in health insurance costs that equates to 2.9% of the district's operating budget increase over last year.
2. A 2.7% increase to staff priority needs and meet contractual obligations to teachers, paraeducators, administrators, custodians, nurses and other critical staff.
3. The compelling need to mitigate learning loss resulting from the Covid global public health crisis.
4. The comprehensive analysis of the district that is in progress to develop the next NPS Strategic Plan.

During our budgeting process, we were mindful that Covid also makes this a challenging year for citywide finances. As a result, before submitting this proposal, we first looked carefully for internal solutions to cover budget requirements, including:

- Reviewing the value of previous expenses to ensure they still delivered results.
- Repurposing federal and state grant money.
- Creating reductions in some areas to build enhancements in others.

Detailed in the pages that follow, the proposed budget is limited to a 5.6% increase over the current year, driven largely by the rise in health insurance costs. Below is an overview of the key factors behind our 2021-22 budget request.

Rise in Health Insurance Costs

Health insurance costs are the most significant driver of this year's operating budget increase.

To reduce costs for the district and employees, in 2017-18 the district moved to the CT 2.0 Partnership Plan offered by the State of Connecticut. Norwalk Public Schools was previously self-insured, which meant the cost for health care went up when employee medical expenses were high. The CT Partnership Plan offered a fixed cost, eliminating the need to keep millions sitting in a reserve account to cover fluctuations, while still providing employees with high quality health coverage.

At the time of the change, the State used a statewide average to set costs. The State is now phasing in county-by-county rate increases that factor in Fairfield County's higher healthcare costs.

As a result, the cost to provide employee health insurance for 2021-22 is expected to rise 25.9%. Under collective bargaining agreements, NPS employees already contribute 18% to their health insurance, in line with over school districts our size.

Contractual Wage Increases

High quality education is dependent on people. As a result, salaries and benefits will always be the largest category of any school system's annual operating budget.

For 2021-2022, contractual wage increases for teachers, paraeducators, administrators, custodians, nurses and other employees will contribute to a 2.6% increase over last year's budget. This includes high priority positions and modest annual salary increases for current staff, in accordance with our negotiated labor contracts.

The Continuing Impact of Covid on Education

While the availability of a coronavirus vaccine is welcome news, students will continue to feel the impact of Covid for years to come. Researchers have identified long-term impacts on children from other widespread emergencies, including the 1918 pandemic, and more recently, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. [From research done at Tulane University](#) following Hurricane Katrina and other crises, we know:

- It can take two years or more for students to recover from lost learning.
- Evidence suggests that the negative impact of Katrina was worse for low income and African-American students.
- More than just the interruption in class time hurt learning. The economic impact on families and emotional trauma students experienced were also significant.

Addressing the impact of learning loss from the Covid disruption needs to be Norwalk's most important priority. As a city, we have a moral obligation to our children to do everything possible to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. We need to bring our children up to grade level as quickly as possible.

Literacy & Math Specialists

With this in mind, the budget proposal incorporates the addition of dedicated literacy specialists at our 12 elementary schools and 4 middle schools. Math specialists will also be required at all 12 elementary schools. The cost for this expense is \$2.5 million, although much of that will be covered by shifting funds from other areas, including a reduction to the additional \$1,000 per pupil allocation provided to magnet schools.

The magnet school supplement was first provided in 2017-18 for establishing or enhancing program elements unique to each magnet's core purpose. Instead of automatically allocating this extra funding without a dedicated purpose, schools will now apply for additional resources. This will ensure that limited funds are put to best use in accelerating student achievement across the district. District obligations to programs such as college level P-TECH classes at Norwalk Community College will remain in place.

New Strategic Plan Development

Despite the continuing realities of our collective pandemic experience, the district's work to plan for the future must move forward.

Following the expiration of the Board of Education's 2016-2019 Strategic Operating Plan, Norwalk Public Schools and the Board of Education have started the necessary work to develop a new Strategic Plan that will guide learning and district operations for the next three to five years. Accountability measures will be expanded, in addition to the performance measures already tracked by the annual Connecticut Department of Education Next Generation Accountability Report.

The plan will integrate comprehensive data and input from independent and district-led audits and studies, including:

- A capacity and coherence review, which examined goals and achievements under the previous strategic plan and included an organizational review.
- An Equity in Education Initiative, in partnership with Temple University, to examine and address educational equity in Norwalk, and to address bias and diversity training for staff.
- A "listening and learning" tour conducted in Norwalk neighborhoods by the superintendent and board members to discuss the hopes and dreams families have for education and student life.
- An independent review of special education processes, supports and services.
- A facilities review to update the comprehensive facilities master plan originally developed in 2016.
- An analysis of human resources practices and operations.

Although some studies remain in progress, the Board of Education and district Strategic Plan Task Force has started to analyze results. Working with the Connecticut Center for School Change, goals and strategies will be developed, with a focus on areas and practices that most impact student growth, achievement and social-emotional wellbeing.

An advisory committee comprised of parents, teachers, staff, funders, and community partners will provide additional input. Public forums will be scheduled to review the draft plan with the public, prior to completion and adoption by the Board in the spring.

Although the plan is well into the development phase, the budget process for 2021-22 precedes the completion of this important work. The proposed budget anticipates that some mission critical structural and programmatic work will need to be funded in 2021-2022 once the Strategic Plan recommendations are finalized. Other needs have been specifically anticipated, such as the return to middle school sports. School-based athletics gives all middle school children an equal opportunity to participate, including those who do not have access to privately run community leagues. Middle school sports combats child obesity, offers a social outlet for our youth at a critical phase in their development, and prepares student-athletes for competitive sports at the high school level.

The majority of other necessary program improvements will be deferred until the 2022-23 budget cycle.

A Unique Moment in History

In submitting this budget, I recognize that we are at a unique moment in history.

When I joined Norwalk Public Schools on July 1, 2020, we faced a momentous task following the unprecedented shut down of in-person learning on March 16. Like so much else related to the Covid pandemic, this was uncharted territory. Thanks to the tireless work of district and school leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals and other staff, as well as families, community partners, and the City of Norwalk, we developed an effective plan for a safe return to school. It included:

- Prioritizing in-person summer school for those students who needed extra support, one of the few districts in the state to do so.

- Establishing instructional models to bring as many students back to in-person learning as possible, with an emphasis on our youngest and most vulnerable learners.
- Starting the school year on September 8, with full in-person instruction available to elementary school students, middle and high school students participating in a hybrid plan, and a remote learning option, per state guidelines, for any families that wanted it.
- Continuing to support children and families with meal pick up sites throughout the city.
- Ensuring that all students have devices and Wi-Fi to learn from home as needed.
- Increasing social-emotional resources, programs and support.

We are proud to say that Norwalk's plan for a safe return to school, and our commitment to providing in-person instruction, have been held up as a model for others throughout the state.

I am grateful for the ongoing support of our teachers, staff, families, students, funders and community partners, as well as for the resilience that the entire Norwalk community have demonstrated this year. I particularly appreciate the tremendous support and guidance provided by the members of the Norwalk Board of Education, and for the spirit of collaboration that Mayor Rilling and members of the Common Council have demonstrated. Working together, we can overcome the obstacles in front of us and ensure our children receive the education they deserve.

Sincerely,

Dr. Alexandra Estrella