

MEMORANDUM

TO: NPS School Committee Members
Rajeev Parlikar
Chris Brezski
Anping Shen
Tamika Olszewski
Emily Prenner
Paul Levy
Amy Davenport
Barry Greenstein
Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

CC: PTOC members
Anna Nolin, Superintendent

FROM: PTO Equity Spending Committee Parent Representatives
Helen Makadia
Michelle Tsay
Lori Zinner

DATE: June 24, 2024

SUBJECT: PTO Equity Spending Committee FY24 Summary,
Feedback, Next Steps for FY25

OUTLINE

1. Feedback to School Committee from PTO Equity Spending Parent Representatives
 - a. Background
 - b. Issues Identified this Year
 - Funding/Spending Disparity
 - Mistrust of Implementation and Adherence
 - Education of NPS employees
 - c. Developments this Year
2. Next Steps for Equity Committee in FY25
3. PTO Equity Spending Committee Members
4. Purpose of the PTO Equity Spending Committee
5. PTO Function and CAS

1. Feedback to School Committee from PTO Parent Representatives

The role of PTO Parent Representatives on this subcommittee is to communicate feedback regarding the implementation and execution of the Equity Spending Policy from the PTOs to the School Committee.

This past year, we have received feedback from PTOs that the Equity Spending Guidelines are difficult to interpret and adhere to, and also unfair, given the varying physical conditions and amenities of each school property. These concerns should be addressed holistically, by the whole committee, which includes NPS and the School Committee.

a. Background

- All NPS schools expect their PTOs to donate funds for daily operations such as classroom supplies, teacher stipends, mini-grants, etc. and curricular-related items such as Creative Arts & Sciences (CAS).
- PTOs donate substantial money to these above equity items (\$500K+ in FY23).
- The School Committee cannot institute a spending floor for equity or non-equity categories.
- The PTOC Equity Spending Committee does not currently have Parent Representative candidates for FY25.

b. Issues Identified this Year

Funding/Spending Disparity

One role of this committee has been to collect PTO spending data from all elementary, middle, and high schools each year, both in order to understand PTO spending habits and also to assess the efficacy and relevance of the Spending Guidelines. The Parent Representatives have collected this data for the past several years and presented it to the School Committee as well as provided biannual education sessions to help PTOs understand the purpose and function of the Guidelines and to promote equitable spending.

- Several PTOs have requested the \$40/pupil equity spending cap be increased, citing rising costs, inflation.

- Collected FY23 data shows that some PTOs max out equity spending, while others only spend an average of 75% of allowable equity. (see [December 4, 2023 presentation](#))
 - o In FY23, 5 schools spent 25% less per pupil than their 10 counterparts on equity items.
- With 1/3 of schools' PTOs not maxing out their allowed equity spending, at well below \$40/pupil, current data does not support an increase to the equity cap.

Mistrust of Implementation and Adherence

This year, the PTO Council (the aggregate body of PTOs in Newton) conducted a survey of its members to identify grievances around the PTO Equity Spending Policy. Responses indicated a feeling of lack of transparency by NPS and the School Committee, which has led to a high level of mistrust regarding adherence to the PTO Equity Spending Guidelines.

The purpose of the guidelines is to promote equity between all of the Newton Public Schools. However, because the guidelines have not been uniformly followed by all PTOs and NPS, they are instead creating division and discord. We make this observation to encourage the School Committee to support thorough implementation of Equity Guidelines.

Currently, three bodies are represented on the PTO Equity Spending Committee:

- School Committee - the policy writer
- NPS (Administration and Principals) - recipient of PTO donations
- PTOC Parent Representatives - funding donors

Neither PTOs nor NPS are in a neutral position to adjudicate violations or disputes regarding adherence to spending guidelines. The School Committee has stated that they are a policy making body, and not an enforcing body; they are, however, the only neutral party in this relationship, being neither the donor nor the beneficiary of funds.

NPS Employee awareness of Equity Guidelines

Another key component of PTO Equity Spending Guidelines is the yearly education of NPS employees, including principals, teachers, and administrative staff. It has been understood since the revision of the guidelines in late 2019 that this education is built into the annual training of NPS staff. It came to our attention this year that this has not been occurring, leading to violations of the Spending Guidelines. This lack of education has also created numerous confusing situations around allowable spending and purchasing of CAS programming, creating additional frustration and mistrust.

2022: Angier violation (rug purchase)

2022: Ward violation (CAS preview not included in Equity Spending)

We have been assured by the Superintendent that she is aware of this lapse in education and henceforth all principals and relevant NPS staff will receive yearly education on the Equity Guidelines. NPS employees' understanding of the guidelines is essential to the implementation and preservation of equity in the Newton Public Schools.

c. Developments this Year

Our December 2023 report shows PTOs spent over \$500,000 on curricular-related items. At our December School Committee presentation, we asked that NPS develop a classroom standard to delineate what the district is responsible for providing in each classroom, as well as what PTOs are allowed to contribute in the classroom, in order to address continued confusion and inconsistency. Dr. Nolin has conveyed that she is committed to creating a classroom standard.

Standardization and transparency are essential to achieving equity between all of the Newton Public Schools. Lack of standardization within the NPS system is the source of multiple ongoing questions and complaints regarding allowable PTO purchases. Even purchases of small items such as headphones for classrooms have been difficult to navigate.

2. Anticipated Next Steps

- **A holistic examination of the PTO Equity Guidelines** Identified by the committee as a goal for FY25
- **Continued Collection of PTO Spending Data** This committee as a whole is expected to continue collecting PTO spending data to inform future revisions. (Spreadsheets for FY24 actual spending has shared with all PTOs in May 2024)
- **Examination of the \$40/pupil cap** FY24 spending data will help the committee determine if an increase to the \$40/pupil cap makes sense, and present findings to the School Committee. Subsequently, the committee should examine the equity categories to ensure they remain consistent with the equity policy.
- **Review of Creative Arts and Sciences** Examine whether the current CAS experiential standard of three programs per grade is meeting the goals of equity among schools. In 2020, the CAS allowance changed from a dollar cap to an

experience cap equity item; the committee should follow up on whether this is a successful and relevant change

- **School Committee to assess the dynamic between NPS and PTOs** PTOs should be aware of their authority and right to direct their donations via uniform guidelines, particularly given that NPS does not refuse PTO donations as applicable.
- **Continued Training of PTOs, Principals and Staff by the whole committee**
- **Consider the Name of the Guidelines to include NPS Acceptance Guidelines** The current name (PTO Equity Spending Guidelines) emphasizes PTOs' responsibility; this policy should assess equal responsibility to both parties' (NPS and PTOs) adherence and commitment to the policy

3. PTO Equity Spending Committee Members

The PTO Equity Spending Committee consists of representatives from the School Committee, NPS Central Administration, Elementary Principals and three representatives elected by the PTO Council. The members of the PTOC Equity Spending Committee for the FY24 school year are:

School Committee Representative

Rajeev Parlikar thru 3/2024, Emily Prenner 3/24 to present

NPS Representatives

Renee McCall, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching & Learning
Ayesha Farag, Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education
Steven Rattendi, Director of IT and Library Services
Andrea Vargas, Pierce Elementary Principal
Diana Beck, Zervas Elementary Principal

PTO Council Representatives (parents/caregivers of NPS students)

Helen Makadia
Michelle Tsay
Lori Zinner

4. Purpose of the PTO Equity Spending Committee

The PTO Equity Spending Committee was established to oversee PTO spending and communicate findings to the School Committee. We provide PTO Equity Spending Guidelines education sessions twice a year for PTO Presidents and Treasurers. We also collect and review PTO actual and budgeted spending to ensure compliance with

PTO Equity Spending Guidelines. The committee maintains the PTO Equity Spending Guidelines and makes recommendations for guideline revisions every two years. The guidelines were last updated in June, 2022, approved by the School Committee in September, 2022, and were implemented with an effective date of July 1, 2023.

5. PTO Function and CAS

In Newton, the PTOs function to provide communication and build community, in addition to supporting curricular enrichment at the schools they serve. The support of curricular enrichment in FY23 at the district level was 50% of all PTO spending, or \$515,355, a meaningful amount. \$225,140 of this went to K-8 Creative Arts and Sciences (CAS) programs. The challenge with curricular enrichment using CAS programming is the crossover into curriculum.

- Programs in the CAS Resource Guide are vetted by NPS to be relevant to curriculum.
- NPS consults with teachers and curriculum coordinators for program scheduling. Programs are scheduled to take place relevant to when the supported unit is being taught.
- The Performance Series is a true enrichment program; it does not need to be scheduled at a specific time to coincide with curriculum timelines.
- Each school's PTO funds their own choices and number of programs from the programs listed in the resource guide; does this create potential for significant inequity in students' academic experience?