

April 26, 2011

RASD Budget FAQs

What action did the Ripon Board of Education take on the 2011-12 budget?

At its April 18 meeting the Board voted unanimously to approve a two-year, 2011-13 budget recommendation of the District Budget Team (Note: The recommendation of the District Budget Team is posted on the District's website).

Why was a 2-year budget approved?

School district budgets are controlled by funding formulas and criteria set by the state legislature and governor every two years in the state's biennial budget. Since the parameters for our 2012-13 budget (i.e., no change in funding levels from 2011-12) are already contained in the proposed Biennial Budget Bill, we are able to develop a two-year budget that reflects our state funding and budgetary restrictions. By developing a two-year budget the Board is maximizing stability over the next two years in staffing and programs while minimizing the likelihood that we will need to make additional cuts a year from now. This will enable students, staff, and parents to make personal and professional plans for the next two years rather than on a year-to-year basis.

How much was cut?

Provisions in the Budget Repair Bill (unpublished law) and the Biennial Budget Bill require a 5.5% cut in the District's revenue limit upon which the budget is based. In addition, annual inflationary increases in operating costs and a slightly declining number of students combine to make deeper cuts necessary. The projected total budget cut for 2011-13 is \$2,266,000.

How did you arrive at a \$2,266,000 budget cut for 2011-13?

The District has a projected shortfall of \$1,666,000 for the 2011-12 school year and an additional projected shortfall of \$600,000 in 2012-13. The shortfalls are caused by the state's mandatory 5.5% reduction, a slight decline in enrollment, and the normal inflationary increases from year to year. The amount of the shortfall must be cut from the budget in order to arrive at a balanced budget. The result is a \$2,266,000 budget cut for 2011-13.

How does this budget cut compare to previous years?

The District has been required to cut nearly \$1.5 million in annual operating costs during the past four years, which is an average of \$750,000 per two-year period or \$375,000 per year. Although the District's budget increased annually in previous years, the budget increase allowed by the state was not sufficient to cover the inflationary costs. In other words, the budget was increasing each year but not increasing enough to cover the cost of retaining all the staff and programs. By contrast, the 2011-12 budget will actually be smaller than the 2010-11 budget. Ripon's annual budget will shrink from approximately \$21 million to approximately \$20 million. Cuts in staff and programs must be made to meet the state's new budgetary restrictions and to balance the District's budget.

Why not just use fund balance instead of cutting quality staff and programs?

The Board tries to maintain a fund balance at the recommended level of 15-16% of its budget in order to provide cash flow to the District for meeting payroll and paying invoices. Since partial payments of state aids and tax receipts are received at intervals throughout the fiscal year, the District needs to rely on its fund balance to meet its financial obligations. Even though the District maintains the recommended fund balance level, the timing of state payments still requires the District to borrow a substantial amount of money to meet payroll and pay invoices during key times of the year. A smaller fund balance would require borrowing more which would drain even more funds from the instructional budget to pay for more interest on the borrowed money. In addition, a lower fund balance reduces the District's bond rating which then raises interest rates for borrowing, thus taking even more money from the instructional budget. This is why the majority of Wisconsin's school districts have even higher fund balance levels than Ripon according to the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Using fund balance for ongoing, operational expenditures—such as paying for staff or programs instead of cutting them—only jeopardizes the District's future while depleting its resources, and without resolving any of the financial issues that will likely continue to grow into the following year.

Who is on the District Budget Team?

The District Budget Team serves in a similar capacity as a budget committee or finance committee of the school board. The District Budget Team consists of four Board members and the District's administrative team who are responsible for various areas of the budget. The team analyzes the District's financial situation and then reviews all suggestions made for staff or program additions or cuts. A final recommendation is made to the full Board. The Board, in turn, reviews and debates the recommendation prior to making a decision. Only Board members have votes in the final decision; neither the superintendent nor any of the administrative team have a vote in the Board's final decision.

Why aren't there any teachers, students, or community members on the District Budget Team?

Board members are community members who have been elected to represent the community's interests in running the school district and have spent considerable time learning about the complexities of school budgets and finance. During the months preceding the District' Budget Team's first meeting, the administration conducts public Budget Listening Sessions at various times and places to talk with any teachers, students, and community members who choose to attend. These Budget Listening Sessions lay out the latest budget projections for the audience, answer questions, and take suggestions for budget additions, cuts, or other ideas. The suggestions are then researched and costed out. (For example, how much do we spend on elementary field trips?) It is these lists of suggestions from teachers, students, and community members that form the basis of the discussions for the District Budget Team. The Team is responsible for considering what is best for the entire school district without any advocacy or bias for a personal agenda. This system has been used effectively in Ripon to deal with budget cuts of past years.

Does the Board really listen to the people who sign up to speak at the Board meetings?

Yes, Board members are very interested in the various perspectives of staff, students, and community members. Wisconsin's Open Meeting laws do not permit Board members to discuss topics that are not posted on the meeting's agenda. For topics that are on the agenda, Board protocol is to listen as elected representatives to the speakers but without engaging in debate or taking any action that would intimidate people from speaking to the Board. On occasion the Board will ask for more information from a speaker if that person has unique knowledge on a subject that is on the agenda. Board members often take notes on the main points of speakers, and it is not unusual for Board members to include those points in discussion of the topic prior to any Board action. There are many facts and points of view to be considered on every issue, and not agreeing with the speaker is not an indication of not having listened to and considered the viewpoint of the speaker. When it comes time to vote, all Board members act to the best of their ability as elected representatives and custodians of the entire school district to exercise oversight for our community's public schools.

Why does the Board say that it values its teachers and then cut positions?

The Board recognizes that the strength of the school district is its employees. The Board spends considerable time in both open and closed session determining how it can best support its employees as the backbone of Ripon's public schools. Recent budgetary cuts of teaching and support staff positions have been due to the state's restrictions on school budgets. None of these cuts has been made without an acknowledgement that the cut is being done only because the state requires that something be cut from the budget. For years the Board has said that it would prefer not to be forced into cutting staff and positions. Rather than a reflection of the person or position, the budget cuts are a reflection of the state's insufficient funding of public education.

How many teachers were cut from the 2011-13 budget?

Out of a \$2.2 million dollar cut in the two-year, 2011-13 budget, the Board approved a recommendation that will likely result in the layoff of the equivalent of two full-time teaching positions. In other words, even though the majority of the school budget consists of employee compensation, the RASD Board managed to cut over \$2 million out of the \$2.2 million total that will be cut in the 2011-13 without any layoffs—but the remaining \$260,000 will result in the layoff of the equivalent of two full-time teaching positions currently filled by employees. When other school districts are laying off dozens of teachers in their budget reductions, Ripon is using natural attrition through retirement and structural changes such as the 7-period day to avoid laying off employees because of the high value that the Board places on its employees.

What does a 7-period day have to do with the budget?

The shift from 8 class periods a day to 7 class periods a day at Ripon High School represents a savings of nearly \$300,000 annually. The savings comes from the fact that students will enroll in fewer classes with a 7-period day than an 8-period day. The Board adopted a plan to leave some RHS teaching and staff positions in the 2011-12 budget while allowing these positions to remain vacant—either through retirement or layoff—for the year and to bank the savings temporarily for budget reduction the following year. The 2012-13 budget would cut the

positions from the budget. By combining the accumulated savings from 2011-12 and the budget reduction for 2012-13, the District will achieve the \$600,000 savings required for the 2012-13 fiscal year.

Can you explain the calculations for a \$300,000 savings from a 7-period day?

There are approximately 550 students at RHS. If they register for one less class each day, there will be 550 fewer course registrations. Since 88-90% of the students currently choose to carry a daily study hall rather than a class each period, it is reasonable to calculate only 500 fewer course registrations. With 25 students per class, 500 fewer registrations calculates to 20 fewer classes. Since a full teaching load at RHS is 5 classes, 20 fewer classes would be 4 fewer teaching positions. However, since more students may choose to go without a study hall, and since course selections don't usually divide into neat 25-student class lists, and since some classes run with fewer than 25 students for safety and facilities reasons, the impact of shifting to a 7-period day has conservatively been calculated on a reduction of 3 teaching positions. At an average cost of \$83,387 per teacher (salary & benefits), the reduction of 3 teaching positions for 2011-12 would be approximately \$250,151. In addition to the reduction of 3 RHS teaching positions, the assumption of study hall supervision by teachers would also eliminate the need for a study hall monitor position at both the middle school and the high school which would be a reduction of 2 study hall aide positions. The total reduction for 2011-12 is projected to total approximately \$300,000.

Will the 7-period day have an earlier dismissal time?

No, the starting and ending times for the school day will remain the same. The state has a requirement for the annual number of instructional hours, and our daily and ending times for the school day meet that requirement. An earlier dismissal time, without an earlier starting time, would require more days of schools to meet the state's requirement for annual instructional hours. This means that class periods in a 7-period day will be longer than class periods in an 8-period day. For RHS that would typically mean that all classes would be 6-7 minutes longer each day with a 7-period schedule than with the current 8-period schedule.

Are there any advantages to a 7-period day?

Although the school day itself—from the starting time to the dismissal time—would be the same with either the 7-period or 8-period day, the length of each class period will be 6-7 minutes longer with a 7-period day than with an 8-period day. A longer class period provides some advantages to classes that have hands-on learning activities—from science labs to art projects to physical education. Longer class periods also provide more time for teachers to provide explanations or assist students as they apply their new knowledge and skills with homework assignments. A major frustration of teachers is that they do not have enough time to get through their curriculum in the high quality manner that they prefer, and longer class periods provides a longer class period each day that translates into 30-35 minutes a week which, in turn, amounts to approximately 18 hours for each subject—or, the equivalent of an additional month of school (20 class periods) for each class.

Are there any advantages to an 8-period day?

A 7-period day, when compared to an 8-period day, simply provides fewer opportunities for students. Instead of 4 years of 8 class opportunities each semester for a total of 64 possible semester classes in a student's high school career with an 8-period day, a 7-period day has a total of 56 possible semester classes. Simply put, a student who chooses to enroll in a full schedule and take the maximum number of classes will have 8 more semester classes with an 8-period day than with a 7-period day.

What would happen if the high school retained an 8-period day?

Comparing this year's 8-period day at RHS with an 8-period day in 2011-12 must take into account the impact of the \$300,000 annual budget reduction. Assuming that the full-time work load for teachers remains the same as it is now, an 8-period day requires more teachers and support staff than a 7-period day. If a budget reduction of \$300,000 is required for each year, then adjustments in staffing will be needed to obtain the necessary budget savings. RHS will have some vacancies in elective subjects in 2011-12, but new teachers would have to be hired to fill those vacancies with an 8-period day in order to provide the necessary extra course opportunities. The ripple effect would mean that the \$300,000 in cost savings in staffing would be taken from core subjects (i.e., English, Math, Science, Social Studies, and World Language), and that means cutting the number of core subject classes offered, laying off current RHS teachers of those core subjects, and raising class sizes in core subjects because there are fewer classes for the same number of students. And, another \$300,000 in core subject staffing at RHS would be needed in 2012-13 which would cause even higher class sizes and more lay-offs of current teachers.

Can the Board declare a 7-period day without negotiating with the teachers union?

State law places the responsibility for designing and overseeing the educational program of public schools with the local school board. The Board not only has the right, but also the responsibility, to provide the curriculum and school experience that the elected Board considers best for its community. The Board can choose for its high school a 7-period day, an 8-period day, a block schedule, or any other schedule of its choosing. However, under current labor law in Wisconsin the Board must negotiate with the local teachers union the impact of any schedule on wages, hours, or working conditions. Such negotiations will likely be a future step after a full analysis has been completed.

What will happen to elective choices with a 7-period day?

A 7-period day will still provide elective opportunities to students in subject areas such as Art, Music, Technology Education, Family/Consumer Education, Agriculture, Computer Science, and Business Education. Although there will be 8 fewer semester opportunities during a 4-year high school career for students with a 7-period day than with the current 8-period day, the Board has made several changes in the past year that have lessened the loss of one period each day. For example, Health class has been moved from the high school to the middle school curriculum, Personalized Physical Education is allowing students to take Physical Education courses outside of the school day, Asian/African Studies is offered in Summer School, online courses are available through the Wisconsin Virtual School, and Band will probably be offered

during “zero hour” before school for students whose schedules are full. Since 88-90% of current RHS students do not take classes all 8 periods of the day because they choose a study hall instead, switching to a 7-period day wouldn’t require a reduction in the daily course load for most students. It should be noted, however, that fewer elective teachers will mean that fewer elective courses will be offered. Ultimately, student course selections, combined with an adjustment of graduation requirements, will determine the eventual elective courses that are part of the curriculum at RHS.

Why is the 7-period day being put into place now?

First, we need to cut \$2.2 million from the 2011-13 two-year budget. Second, we currently have some retirements in the high school elective subject areas. Since the Board prefers to use natural attrition for cuts instead of laying off employees, the timing is best to make the cuts to elective subject areas now so the impact will be minimized on our remaining dedicated employees. Similarly, positions that become vacant due to retirement or resignation are often left open or eliminated in the budgeting process in accordance with the same preference for natural attrition. In the end, the education program for students is the final consideration for filling vacant positions or eliminating them—or, for moving to a 7-period day or remaining with the current 8-period day. The Board has decided that, all things considered, students would be better off in the long run with a strategic transfer to a 7-period day now than being placed into larger classes in core subjects or other scenarios that would occur if the 8-period day was retained and the budget cut made through other changes.

Does anyone else have a 7-period day?

While we don’t have an exact count of how many of Wisconsin’s high schools operate with a 7-period day, it is a common daily schedule throughout the state and across the nation. In fact, RHS used a 7-period until 20 years ago (1990-91) when it converted to an 8-period day. Oshkosh, Fond du Lac, and Winneconne are neighboring districts that use a 7-period day in their high schools. Some other schools in our region who use an 8-period day actually have one of those periods designated as a lunch period, which means they operate like a 7-period day. Knowing how the daily lunch period is figured into the schedule is a key piece of information for comparing schools since the number of class periods may not provide a full picture. RHS will continue to use a split lunch so all students can be seated comfortably in the cafeteria as well as moving quickly through lunch lines that are half as long as they were under a single lunch schedule.

What will happen to high school graduation requirements?

The Board will be reviewing the current high school graduation requirements in light of the change to a 7-period day. Students currently have 32 class periods (8 per day times 4 years) during which they can take classes. Also, middle school classes such as Algebra 1 and Spanish 1/German 1 provide two more opportunities which brings the total to 34 classes. Students currently need 27 credits to graduate from Ripon High School. That is calculated to be 7 classes and 1 study hall per year, for a total of 28, minus 1 class credit to allow for a failure or time for work. Also, there are specific required classes that must be taken within the 27 credits, some required by state law and some only required locally by the Ripon Board. Additional local

credits currently required in Ripon include a third year of math, a year of vocational arts, a half-year of fine arts, and a half-year of financial literacy. The school board will be re-examining the total number of credits required for high school graduation, the locally required courses, and the way in which courses taken in middle school will be counted. A decision, which will include a transition plan for students who have already completed some high school years, is expected by mid-summer.

Why was the part-time elementary school counselor position cut?

The part-time elementary school counselor position was cut because of the overall budget cut required by a reduction in funding for public schools. The District currently has a full-time school counselor, a full-time school psychologist, and a part-time (3 days/week) school counselor serving Barlow Park, Murray Park, and Quest elementary schools. The elimination of the part-time elementary counselor position was deemed less disruptive in the long-term than the other options. That's because some duties previously assigned to the school psychologist will be reassigned or terminated in order to provide a comparable level of service to K-5 students. In addition, some less-critical activities previously done by the school counselors will either be restructured, reassigned, or terminated. Although services are generally reduced when budgets are reduced, it is believed that the impact of having less school counselor time can be minimized through these efforts.

What will happen to K-8 library services?

Libraries will remain open for students and teachers, but with a reduced library staff. Although each school had its own library media specialist just a few years ago, recent budget reductions mandated by state law have meant that vacancies (due to retirement or resignation) in the library media specialist positions have been eliminated as separate positions in our schools. Therefore, at the start of the 2010-11 school year, the District had a K-8 media specialist who served BPES, MPES/QES, and RMS. RHS still had its own full-time library media specialist. With the resignation of the K-8 media specialist, the Board followed its preference of downsizing by natural attrition and eliminated the position. The BPES, MPES/QES, and RMS libraries will still be staffed by a full-time library media aide at each school building for daily operations. The RHS library media specialist will take time away from RHS each week to oversee certain tasks at each of the K-8 school libraries such as ordering books and materials, working with teachers, and overseeing an effective operation. Unfortunately, the trend across the state is to reduce highly trained library media specialist personnel due to budget cuts.

What is the status of our administrators in the budget cutting process?

Although teachers have ongoing contracts, state law limits contracts of administrators to two years. The law also requires that contracts of administrators be renewed or terminated prior to January 31 each year. The Board, acting in accordance with state law, renewed administrative contracts in January. Administrators continue to have two-year contracts that now run for two more school years—through June 30, 2013. Nearly four weeks after the Board renewed administrative contracts, Governor Walker surprised everyone in the state with his Budget Repair Bill. By then the statutory deadline for non-renewing administrators had passed, and the contracts with administrators remain legally binding. What this means is that although

some terms of the administrative contracts, such as the requirement for pension contributions, may be overridden by the new state law, the overall employment contracts of administrators remain in force. Therefore, any reductions in administrative staff are not feasible from either a legal or cost-saving perspective. The Board has indicated that any vacancy that occurs in the administrative staffing in the future, similar to all vacancies in the District, will be reviewed for possible budgetary savings and restructuring consequences.

How much do the District's charter schools cost?

There is no extra cost from our charter schools—either in the current budget or in future budgets. That's because the District has designed its charter schools to operate at the same cost as other schools in the district. A third grade classroom, therefore, costs the same whether it is in Quest or in Murray Park. The same is true at other levels. Furthermore, Crossroads Academy actually saves money every day compared to the previous cost of sending those students to out-of-district programs that they needed for high school completion. Finally, the grants received by charter schools are strictly for start-up costs and are not used for ongoing operating costs. When the start-up charter school grants run out, there are no significant costs that must be picked up by the District because we've used the grants only for one-time, start-up costs. Not all school districts use this approach, so there are news stories about increased budgets due to charter schools in other Wisconsin school districts or in other states—but Ripon's charter schools cost the same as our other schools.

What happened to the District's slogan of "More choices—better results?"

Ripon still provides more choices than many school districts much larger than us. RHS will still offer electives not available at other schools in our region. Ripon's project-based learning charter schools provide choices for parents not found in very many communities. Our 4-year-old preschool program will continue to offer 4 different sites to parents, each one with a unique program. Extra-curricular activities, including many in the fine arts and academic areas, have been preserved in this budget. Finally, the quality of the District lies within its staff, and this budget minimizes layoffs because we value our current staff and the choices they offer Ripon kids. While other school districts are slashing teachers and programs, Ripon is choosing a strategic path that reinforces the Board's goal of more choices and better results.

What's the vision for the future?

Ripon will be a school district of choice. The Ripon Area School District has a long tradition and a solid reputation for quality. The Board is thinking ahead and restructuring for the future so that the District continues its tradition and reputation for excellence. There are approximately 424 school districts now in Wisconsin, but very few people believe there will be that many in 10-20 years due to efficiencies driven by tight budgets and new options such as online learning. Only the strongest school districts who have planned for the future will survive, and our vision is that Ripon will be prepared for the many changes that will occur in the near future. Maintaining the status quo will doom us to becoming irrelevant and swallowed up. Consumers will have choices in the future about where and how their children will be educated, and the Ripon Area School District is making changes now so that it will continue to be a school district of choice for parents who want a quality education for their children.