

BPS Budget: The Crucial Role of the Boston School Committee

The Boston School Committee holds a crucial responsibility in reviewing and approving the Boston Public Schools (BPS) budget. To fulfill its duty, the School Committee faces a substantial workload to ensure that the FY25 budget aligns with established goals and policies while adequately addressing the needs of BPS' more than 45,000 students. The School Committee holds exclusive authority to scrutinize line items of the BPS budget and bears both legal and financial obligations to adjust the spending plan as needed. The School Committee's active engagement in this role is vital to Boston's fiscal health.

During the FY24 budget discussion, questions regarding the exact authority of the School Committee over the budget clouded the process. In fact, the School Committee's power is clear: it can adopt, reject, increase, or decrease any item within the Superintendent's recommended budget. Through this process, the School Committee can and must ensure the fiscal soundness and sustainability of the school budget. The Chair of the School Committee should design a budget process that includes both active engagement by School Committee members as well as formal opportunities for the Committee to vote on changes to individual budget line items prior to the final budget vote.

What is the BPS Budget Process?

- The BPS budget process begins in the late fall, when the Mayor's team informs the Superintendent of the expected appropriation amount for the upcoming fiscal year.
- The Superintendent must submit a recommended FY25 budget to the School Committee no later than the first Wednesday in February (February 7, 2024).
- According to Massachusetts law, ([Ch.613, Acts of 1987](#)) the School Committee has the authority to adopt, reject, reduce, or increase any item in the recommended budget.
- The School Committee's budget review commences upon submission. If the School Committee finds any part of the budget not aligning with goals, priorities, educational standards, or fiscal responsibility, it has the responsibility to take action.
- The School Committee Chair should implement a budget hearing process that empowers the School Committee to exercise its authority consistently. This could involve scheduling special meetings following budget presentations and discussions to allow for careful consideration of adjustments to the budget proposal. This oversight and direction could occur through votes taken at various stages of the process and not only at the last meeting.

School Committee Responsibility

Massachusetts law ([MGL.c71](#) and [Ch.613, Acts of 1987](#)) grants three primary responsibilities to the school committee.

- 1) Establish educational goals and policies for the school district and determine that the goals are met.
- 2) **Review and approve budgets** for public education in the district.
- 3) Hire or terminate the Superintendent.

In particular, when it comes to budget review and approval, **the Boston School Committee must actively embrace this responsibility not only during budget season but consistently throughout the year.** The law is clear: the School Committee plays a crucial role in ensuring that the BPS budget aligns with educational standards, priorities, and is fiscally responsible.

- Under state law, the School Committee must take “definite action” on the budget on or before the fourth Wednesday in March (March 27, 2024). If the Committee fails to take definite action, the budget as recommended by the Superintendent is “deemed approved as if formally approved by the School Committee.” Definite action includes votes to adopt, reject, reduce, or increase any item in the recommended budget. Definite action will typically be approval of the Superintendent’s proposed budget or approval of a revised budget.
- While there is disagreement on this point, the School Committee could vote to reject all line items in the budget on or before the fourth Wednesday in March. A majority of the School Committee could also vote against a motion to adopt the budget. In a well-designed budget process that includes the School Committee voting to change budget items with which it is dissatisfied, a rejection of the Superintendent’s budget should not be the norm. The School Committee must eventually approve a budget for the public schools. As a practical matter, the deadline for the School Committee’s approval appears to be early May since the Mayor must submit the BPS budget to the City Council no later than the second Wednesday in May (May 8, 2024).
- Traditionally, the Mayor submits to the City Council an annual operating and capital budget for the City, including the BPS budget, for the forthcoming fiscal year by the second Wednesday in April (April 10, 2024). The inclusion of the school budget in this submission is based on tradition but is not a statutory requirement. Rather, the legal requirement is that the Mayor submit the school budget to the City Council no later than the second Wednesday in May (May 8, 2024).
- After the Mayor receives the approved budget, she may approve or reduce the total recommended BPS budget. The Mayor does not have the authority to revise specific provisions of the BPS budget. No later than the second Wednesday in May, she must submit the BPS budget to the City Council for appropriation. The City Council must act on the Mayor’s school budget recommendation by the second Wednesday in June (June 12, 2024). The City Council may approve, reject, or reduce the overall school budget recommendation. It may not change individual items within it or increase the budget.

The Essential Role of the School Committee

While the Mayor and City Council play important roles regarding the bottom line of the BPS budget, the School Committee has the sole authority to increase, decrease, adopt, or reject specific items within the Superintendent’s recommended budget. Moreover, there is no doubt about the ultimate responsibility of the School Committee under state law to approve a budget and its duty both to carefully scrutinize the budget and to exercise its independent judgment as to what is in the best interest of Boston Public Schools and its students.