

← Back

'They knew it was coming' - Franklin charter school head: Expansion plan not to blame for town's deficit

By Lauren Young Daily News Staff May 8, 2019 Publication: Milford Daily News, The (MA) Page: A1 Word Count: 697

Editor's note: The first of two stories regarding Franklin's fiscal 2020 budget issues.

FRANKLIN - Since the expansion of the Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter Public School was first discussed six years ago, Executive Director Heather Zolnowski said its impact has remained transparent with the town.

And while she believes it's a factor in the town budget, she says it's not to blame for the town's looming structural deficit entering fiscal year 2020.

"We've been talking about this for six years - they knew it was coming," said Zolnowski in response to comments from Deputy Town Administrator Jamie Hellen that the school's expansion costs have left a dent in the fiscal 2020 budget. Hellen is forecasting a structural deficit, possibly extending to fiscal 2022 due to a lack of sufficient state funding for the charter school.

According to Hellen, more than \$5 million in town funding is being diverted to the school in fiscal 2020 - \$1.1 million more than this year.

Zolnowski, however, said the charter school's expansion isn't a "driving cause" of the town deficit, saying there are increases in other departments putting more pressure on the budget. She said the only additional spending associated with the school is the reimbursement money that states give to districts to ease the impact of students transferring, as money earmarked for their education moves with them. She said local school districts "wrongly scapegoat" charter schools as reasons for budget constraints.

According to the Mass Charter School Association, the state reimburses the funds over a six-year period - 100 percent for the first year and 25 percent for the next five years. It adds up to more than double the money back, according to the association.

Since the Franklin charter school's expansion process began, Zolnowski said the school has paid more than \$1 million to the town, and that enrollment rates are annually presented to ensure that both entities are on the same page.

"We've been abundantly clear over a number of years," said Joanne Basile, communications director at the charter school. "We've always tried to work with (the town) as collaboratively as possible."

"And (the town) been very supportive of us building this facility," added Zolnowski.

For the 2019-20 school year, the charter school received 211 enrollment applications from Franklin, with 95 accepting offers after a lottery in March, said Zolnowski. At the end of this current school year, 31 eighth-graders will transfer to the high school, resulting in a net impact of 64 students, said Basile.

For 2019-20, 375 out of the charter school's 708 students will be from Franklin - that's 17 fewer students since the first regional lottery for the 2015-16 school year, but 65 more students than the current year.

Zolnowski said enrollment is steadily decreasing as a result of this regionalization, and while the school will be doubling its K-5 - which means four classrooms for each grade - grades 6-8 will stay the same, said Basile.

Unlike public schools, charters receive funding when students enroll, but still face similar financial struggles, such as rising health care costs, special education and English learner education, citing the "stagnant" state of state funding, said Zolnowski.

"Charter schools are given a modest facility allocation from the state of Massachusetts; however, it has been stagnant for more than a decade with no adjustments for inflation, while the cost of sustaining a facility has dramatically increased," wrote Zolnowski in a recent letter to parents.

According to the Mass Charter School Association, charter schools receive about 22 percent less funding than districts.

"As a result, many charter public schools are diverting approximately 10-15 percent of their operating budgets out of the classroom just to pay for facilities - these are funds that would otherwise be invested in materials and experiences that could increase the quality of education for our future leaders," Zolnowski said.

The new building at 500 Financial Park Drive is expected to open this fall, with enrollment eventually expanding to 900 students in coming years in a "slow, measured way," she said.

The school plans to move into the new building by the end of this month, she said, and did a preliminary move over April break, shifting about 250 loaded large crates into a storage facility.

Lauren Young can be reached at 508-634-7532 or lyoung@wickedlocal.com. Follow her on twitter at [laurenatmilford](https://twitter.com/laurenatmilford).

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Date: May 8, 2019

Page: A1

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