To the Weston Community:

We are currently deep in the budget process for 2020-2021 school year. Earlier this fall, the administration presented what we call "Budget A", which sets out what our budget would be if we keep all services level and apply only known changes to compensation and certain other expenses. From Budget A, administration then works together to make adjustments based on enrollment, district needs and new initiatives from the Superintendent's goals. Budget A for the next year came in at a 4.5% increase over the current budget, which is a concerning amount of growth given the decline in enrollment that we have seen this year, particularly at the high school.

We are fortunate that the residents of Weston have supported our public schools through periods of growth and regulatory change that require additional staffing, through necessary building projects, and through new initiatives to improve the learning, health and well-being of our students. Over the past few years, these initiatives include the addition of instructional coaches, the addition of a senior administrator who is currently focused on supporting our students' social and emotional needs, the addition of team chairs in each building, the implementation of an elementary reading curriculum, the implementation of an elementary writing curriculum, and the addition of AP Psychology and other new courses at the high school. But that trust and support from our residents comes with a need to remain fiscally responsible.

The vast majority of our budget increase relates to compensation. We have, over the last year, completed negotiations with five of our six unions. The increase in compensation is driven by the cost of living increase, steps (pay increases based on seniority), and lanes (pay increases based on post-graduate study).

The school committee charged the administration with finding efficiencies in the 2020-2021 budget that will reduce the rate of growth without a negative impact on the breadth of programming we offer, student choice or an increase in class sizes beyond our stated ranges. The difficult and careful work of the administration in refining the budget is underway, and the first draft of the proposed budget for 2020-2021 will be presented at our meeting on January 13, 2020.

Understandably, any discussion of efficiencies or budget cuts can cause concern, particularly among staff, and the faculty have drafted a communication to alert parents and residents to their concerns regarding any proposed cuts to staff at the high school. I believe that it makes sense to provide some additional information to the community now in advance of the presentation of the proposed budget in January.

First, I'd like to discuss how we determine staffing. Staffing at the elementary schools is fairly straight forward. Because the elementary day is fixed around a core homeroom teacher, the number of faculty is largely a mathematical exercise based on the total number of students spread across sections that adhere to our class size ranges. Staffing at the Middle School, while more complex because of the movement among classes during the day, largely follows a similar

process because most students in each grade take the same core courses. We expect to see enrollment-based staff adjustments at the elementary and middle schools as we would in any year.

Staffing at the high school is far more complex because of, among other things, the breadth of our rich program of studies, the impact of the 8-day, 40-block schedule, and the possibility of mixed-grade students in classes. What is not difficult to understand, however, is that our enrollment at the high school is down.

The faculty communication fails to mention enrollment trends, but they are important. High School enrollment over the last decade peaked in 2012-2013 at 782 students, dropping to 727 in 2015-2016 and 707 in 2018-2019. We have 44 fewer students at the high school this year than we did in 2018-2019, and we project a decrease of an additional 14 students next year. While we had a reduction of a little more than 1 full-time equivalent staff member at the high school for this fiscal year, it did not parallel the reduction in students. Also, in some years, staff retirements act as a buffer against reductions in staff. In other years, such as the current one, retirements may not keep pace with enrollment declines or align with areas where we have overcapacity. As a result, we do anticipate staff reductions at the high school.

As the faculty indicated in bold and underline, staff reductions mean larger class sizes. That is inarguable. However, class sizes at the high school in some areas have decreased to fiscally unsustainable levels. In the current year, the high school is running 35 classes at fewer than our mandated minimum of 15 students. While there are a number of reasons we support classes below the minimum, including capstone courses and smaller groupings for students in need, 35 classes below 15 students is significant and unsustainable.

In another example, this year we have 10 sections of a 9th grade core course, with an average class size of 15.9 students. Eliminating one section would increase the average to 17.6 students, and dropping two sections would only increase the average size to less than 20 students, still far below our guideline of up to 24 students. These are the types of imbalances we expect the administration to address in their proposed budget. We have not asked for, and do not expect to see, class sizes over 24 students except in very limited circumstances. I note that each year, the School Committee is given a report of classes at the High School that run with 25 or more students. This year that list contains only vocal and instrumental ensembles.

Another issue raised by faculty is movement from Honors and AP courses into CP courses. I looked at some classes that typically see movement from Honors/AP to CP, using final numbers from December 2019 after all movement has occurred. I found that in one subject, both 10th and 11th grade sections could be reduced while still allowing ample room for additional movement, *and* with class sizes remaining between 20 to 21 students. Similarly, we believe that we have room to make reductions that will not impact students' ability to take their preferred courses. Continuing improvements in course selection procedure, timing and design should improve the process over our current situation, even with some reductions in number of

sections. Again, we trust the administration to recommend efficiencies where available that do not have a negative impact on student choice.

When discussing the impact of larger class sizes, faculty raises the possibility of less timely feedback to students and more students seeking out teacher help during W block. This assertion concerns me deeply, and should concern others. We again are fortunate that the residents of Weston have supported a schedule where our teachers at the high school teach four courses, meaning that they are teaching only 20 of the 40 blocks in the 8-day rotation. The idea behind a 50% teaching schedule is intentional to allow sufficient time for meeting with students and correcting student work. This schedule provides ample opportunity for timely feedback, even at a class size of 24.

Finally, the administration is not solely looking to faculty for efficiencies. All aspects of the budget are being reviewed, including administration, other non-faculty staff members, and overhead expenses, to see how we can continue to deliver the finest academic and social/emotional learning experience for our students in a fiscally responsible manner. I must reiterate, in bold and underline, that **we are not eliminating programs or recommending an increase in class sizes beyond our target range**.

We value tremendously our faculty and staff and their efforts on behalf of our children. Our faculty are among the highest paid in the Commonwealth, and we believe that across the board our compensation, benefits, and working conditions for all staff are at or above our peers. We also value the trust and support of the taxpayers of Weston. Most importantly, we remain committed to providing robust educational and social opportunities for all of our students. We look forward to working with the administration and the town on the 2020-2021 budget.

Thank you,
John Henry
Chair, Weston School Committee