

Talk of cuts can't be avoided at 'How Schools Work' event

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MERIDEN — The topic of the night was the workings of the city's school system, but teachers and parents in attendance seemed to have their minds on the elephant in the room — budget cuts.

The third and final meeting on "How Schools Work," Wednesday's presentation at Hanover School, laid out how the levels of government work together to fund and manage the school system. The meeting was hosted by the non-profit Meriden Children First Initiative and featured speakers from the Board of Education, City Council, and board and city departments.

Bob Angeli, Meriden's associate school superintendent, explained that despite budget cuts resulting in the loss of staff and programs over the last several years, the school district was making progress on several fronts. He cited improving standardized test scores and the success of Thomas Hooker School, which received a U.S. Department of Education award for excellence.

City Councilor George McGoldrick told the audience of several dozen that it wasn't easy to walk the line between what the Board of Education says it needs and what the city can afford. The City Council receives a budget request from the school board, allocates money, and then the school board can use those funds as it sees fit.

"Our decision has to be based on what we think the city can afford ..." McGoldrick said of the process.

This year, that process is likely to be contentious. The school board has asked for a 3 percent increase in funding, while City Manager Lawrence J. Kendzior has suggested the City Council keep school spending the same, at \$99.6 million.

The school board estimates that flat-funding would be the financial equivalent of eliminating 55 teacher positions, and will cause a large rise in class sizes.

Hanover reading teacher Mary Kennedy asked Kendzior how he could flat-fund the district if devastating cuts would be the result.

The board's warning that class sizes could rise above 30 was "alarmist," Kendzior said, noting that the school board would have \$1 million left over from this year's budget to help cover next year's costs. He said the board has routinely overestimated expenses.

Board members Robert E. Kosienski Jr. and Michael P. Cardona did not dispute that there would be a surplus in this year's budget, but they did not feel the increase in class sizes was an exaggeration.

Cardona regularly tours schools, he told a parent, and he's seen firsthand how large kindergarten classes left teachers swamped earlier this year before the board voted to restore funding for paraprofes-

sionals. Several other classes in the city have 29 or 30 students each, although most are below that level.

Kennedy said she doesn't like the implications of budget cuts, but she doesn't have a solution, either.

"The community needs to come together and work something out," she said.