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Exchange student Soya Kayo uses a map to show how far his home in Okinawa is from the area in northern Japan devastated by an earthquake and tsunami last week. Kayo was among 21 students who spent 12 days living with volunteer host families in Biddeford. (Gillian Graham photo)

A 'bare bones' budget

Biddeford schools eye job cuts to meet \$1.4 million shortfall

By Gillian Graham
Staff Writer

Biddeford School Committee members say the "bare bones" school budget may force the district to eliminate up to 28 positions.

The committee last week passed the initial school budget of \$31.1 million for fiscal year 2011-12, which now goes to the city council for approval. Biddeford residents will vote on the budget during June's budget validation referendum.

The proposed budget is up from \$27.8 million for the current year.

The school committee on March 8 voted 6-1 in favor of the budget, with committee member Tony Michaud opposed. The committee reduced the total by nearly \$1.4 million from the \$32.5 million recommended by the finance committee.

School committee member Nathan Mills said the school district is facing a revenue shortfall of nearly \$1.4 million. Committee members said the reduction is necessary to satisfy the city council's directive to submit a budget that does not raise the property tax rate above the increase already expected from debt service for the \$34 million Biddeford High School renovation.

"The city council has been very clear that there will be no increase above and beyond our debt service," said committee member Laura Seaver.

Mayor Joanne Twomey, who also is chairman of the school committee, said taxpayers face a 9 percent rise in the property tax rate, or \$1.30 per \$1,000 of property valuation.

"In a time when gas and oil are going up, people are frightened," she said. "You're looking at a hefty increase for people on a fixed income. It's a sacrifice for all of us."

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Exchanging lessons

Japanese students visit area as tragedy unfolds overseas

By Gillian Graham
Staff Writer

As America woke up March 11 to news images of the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan, Biddeford Middle School Principal Charles Lomonte's phone began to ring.

His phone continued to ring non-stop for hours as people from across the community tried to find out if the families of 21 Japanese exchange students staying in Biddeford were out of harm's way.

"Immediately, everyone's heads went to these kids," he said. "I've never seen anything like it. The phone never rings like that. It was beautiful to see that."

The students and two chaperones from Naha Kokusai High School in Okinawa spent 12 days this month staying with volunteer host families in Biddeford. The exchange through the Center for Cultural Interchange provided students with a chance to attend classes, try new foods and experience everyday American life.

Though much of the trip was focused on fun experiences,

exchange students and host families said they were saddened to hear news of an earthquake and tsunami that killed thousands of people and leveled villages.

The exchange students said Okinawa was safe because of its distance from Sendai, the hardest hit area.

"I'm so sad. I have no friends or family in Sendai, but I'm Japanese so I'm sad," said student Yumika Tomita.

Soya Kayo, 16, said he was "surprised and shocked" to hear news of the disaster, but thankful to his host family for their support.

"I really feel bad about all the people who lost their lives. I know Okinawa is far away, but we live in the same country," said student leader Sarah Irahia.

Host mother Shelley Gelinis said her family watched news coverage of Japan, but her Japanese guest didn't seem to want to talk about it at first. Everyone was comforted to find out her family was safe, she said. Watching news coverage while hosting Japanese exchange students changed the way Gelinis absorbed

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Shoppers, pantries feel pinch of prices

By Gillian Graham
Staff Writer

Higher food prices, combined with rising gas and oil costs, are straining already tight budgets and forcing many Mainers to change shopping habits or seek help from local pantries.

Food prices in January rose 1.8 percent from the previous year, marking the fastest pace since 2009, according to the U.S. government's Consumer Price Index. Higher produce prices are the result of bad weather in different parts of the world,

while beef and pork prices are up because of tight grain supplies.

Regardless of the reason, many Mainers are feeling the pinch and turning to food programs for help, said Jodi Bissonnette, director of Sanford-based York County Food Rescue. The program distributes food to 52 food pantries and soup kitchens across York County.

"The need has gone up more than I can keep track of," she said. "The soup kitchens are seeing more families than they ever did

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Volunteer Dorothy Hall sorts a bag of food Tuesday at Friends of Community Action Food Pantry in Biddeford. Like other local agencies, the pantry has seen an increase in the number of people applying for help. (Gillian Graham photo)

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Students

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the news.

"It definitely hits closer to home. It feels like it's sadder when you know someone from that area," she said. "It's very devastating."

Annie Chabot, whose family hosted two students, said she was glued to the television, but felt she had to shield the girls from the devastating news.

"It really brought it home. It almost felt like it was happening here in the U.S.," she said.

Host mother Isabelle Farley said her two students watched some news coverage with her on Saturday.

"It made it more real, more personal," she said. "It definitely had a different meaning to it."

Kathy Hanson of the Center for Cultural Interchange said the program is an opportunity for international students to practice English and learn about American culture.

"They're really here to be part of the American experience," she said.

Lomonte said this is the third time Biddeford schools have hosted students through the program. Previously, students visited from South Korea and India. Hosting students from other countries is important because Maine tends to be

isolated, he said.

"Our students really gain an appreciation that this is a global world, that it's a world without boundaries," he said.

Biddeford High School Principal Britton Wolfe said his students learn a tremendous amount from meeting and getting to know exchange students. Before hearing more about life in Japan, Biddeford students "didn't know Okinawa from a hole in the ground," he said.

"Biddeford can be kind of an insular place, so it's great to have students from a different part of the world," he said.

Wolfe said it was exciting to watch the Japanese students experience various aspects of life in Maine, including maple sugaring and sledding at Harris Farm in Dayton.

The national anthems of two countries thousand of miles apart filled a room usually reserved for quiet study Monday as teenagers discussed life in Japan. Biddeford High School students crowded into the school library for a presentation by Japanese students about culture, food and customs.

After the exchange students asked about the Pledge of Allegiance, Biddeford students rose slowly to their feet for an impromptu performance of the National Anthem. The Japanese students then sang their own national anthem.

Iraha, 16, said the Japanese students live on the tropical island of Okinawa. She said

students in Japan wear uniforms to school and attend classes from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Their summer vacation is two weeks long.

Iraha said Japanese teenagers watch baseball, enjoy chatting with friends, singing karaoke and dancing. They listen to songs by Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber.

Iraha, who was born in America but has lived in Okinawa since she was a year old, said she most enjoyed meeting other teenagers and visiting Harvard University for the first time.

Kei Yamashiro, 16, said he developed a taste for Capri Sun juice drinks, but overall thinks American food is not healthy. He previously visited New York, Las Vegas and Hawaii, but enjoyed his first trip to Maine.

"I think Maine is very good, but a little bit cold," he said. "Maine people are very friendly. This city is very great."

Tomita, 16, said she decided to come to the United States for her first visit to experience American school life, culture and food. She was surprised that students stood to salute the flag each morning and thought some food was good. She also enjoyed ice skating and playing in snow for the first time.

"It was exciting to have a snowball fight," she said.

For Kayo, the trip to America was a way for him to overcome shyness and practice speaking English.

"In America everything is big," he said. "I like hamburgers very much. In Japan, hamburgers are very small."

Kayo said he was surprised by the differences between Japanese and American schools. In Okinawa, his school does not have a cafeteria and students stay in the same classroom all day while teachers move around.

At a farewell party Monday night at Biddeford Middle School, students and host families gathered for pizza, basketball and a chance to share their experiences. Farley said she and her husband, Kenneth, previously hosted an exchange student through Rotary International.

"It's a way to bring culture to our kids," she said.

The Farleys – including Mitchell, 11, and Madelyn, 9 – opened their home to Yamashiro and Syuto Adaniya. During their 12-day stay, the boys joined the family for sporting events, a lobster dinner and a trip to the University of Maine in Orono.

Madelyn Farley said after hearing all about Japan, she wants to visit the country. She said it was fun to spend time with Yamashiro and Adaniya.

"We went all sorts of places and they taught me a few words," she said.

Gelinas said she and her husband, Donald, decided to host Yui Higayama after talking to Hanson about the program.

"She made it seem so appealing," she said. "They initially worried about the age difference between Higayama and their daughters – 11-year-old Emily and 8-year-old Abby – Gelinas said the three girls had a great time together."

"It was great to see (Yui) playing in the snow for the first time," she said.

Gelinas said Higayama taught her daughters how to write their names in Japanese and fold origami. Each night, Emily and Abby filled pages in their journals describing bringing Higayama to a Red Claws game, Fort Williams in Cape Elizabeth and a lobster dinner at DiMillo's Floating Restaurant in Portland.

"It was an awesome experience," Gelinas said.

For Chabot, hosting two Japanese girls was a "wonderful" experience that was educational for the whole family, including her 13-year-old daughter, Emma.

"I thought it would be a good way to broaden her horizons," she said. "It's been absolutely wonderful. It's made the world seem like a smaller place."

As the students and host families finished their pizza, Akiko Kuba, an adult leader from Japan, said she and the students are appreciative of their time in Biddeford.

"We are always waiting for you to come visit us in Okinawa," she said. "We could all feel your heart."

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