

From the Superintendent...

SCHOOL CHOICE

On Monday, March 26, the residents of Sudbury will again be asked to vote on a Prop 2 ½ override. On that day, residents are being asked to dig a little deeper just to keep the services and programs they already have. For Sudbury Public Schools, the override will not restore the reductions made in past years, nor provide growth to fully accommodate the increase in enrollment or the need for additional programs and services. An override to just pay for what you are currently getting, reflects that in our state, where the obligation to pay for education falls on the local taxpayer, the costs are rising faster, to just maintain what we are doing, than the capped property tax revenue can provide. This is not solely a Sudbury issue, but company does not lessen the misery. This structural deficit brings us to a choice between an override and reducing services.

I understand that this is a difficult choice even for the most steadfast school supporters. We may understand the impact that high quality of schools have on property values, and have on future educational opportunities of our children, or even on the ability for the schools to continuously improve. These must now be filtered through the economic choices that each family faces. Because this is a high-stakes choice, I feel obligated to, as rationally and business-like as possible, outline what lies before us.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I am biased. Sudbury Public Schools will serve 3,369 children next year from pre-K through 8th grade not only in their academic development but also in their social, behavioral, emotional, physical, and civic growth. By most any benchmark, we have high performing schools with children who are motivated and happy and educators who are talented and caring. We are moving forward to improve our math program, to ensure all students are reading and writing at high levels, and to ensure that we are challenging our most talented students while closing the achievement gap between subgroups of students. We are addressing bullying, food allergies, school safety, nutrition and physical health, generational relationships, and drug and alcohol awareness. Yet, the most exciting aspect of SPS is, that despite our success, we remain committed to continued improvement. That commitment sets us apart from many other schools. That commitment allows us to serve the changing needs of our children and society, and respond to the expectations of our parents and community. I know that commitment will certainly remain, but the resources to meet the commitment will be at risk if cuts and reductions to our programs are necessary.

So what are the implications we face of the override budget and the non-override budget that have been proposed?

At SPS, if we make no changes in staffing level from one year to another, pay only the reasonable raises that have been negotiated, and include increase in expenses for only special education, utilities and transportation, our operating budget would have to increase by 5.7%. While much of this is for the annual salary increases, it is important to remember that schools are labor intensive (78% of our operating budgets is in salaries and wages), yet the salaries of our

teachers (and L-S teachers as well) are the lowest of the comparable communities, as determined by a recent Sudbury Finance Committee study.

The override budget presented allows us to meet those costs, add two teachers at the middle school where the enrollment will increase by 66 students, plus provide \$42,000 for increased costs of instructional supplies, technology and school budgets. We will maintain programs for students, class size in most cases, and the momentum that exists around improvement. No new initiatives or programs, but no reductions in staffing.

The non-override budget picture is very different. The non-override budget allows for total growth of 1.6%, an increase of \$404,648 over a \$25.4 million budget. That growth obviously falls far short of what is required to maintain level staffing and programs. In fact, this creates a deficit of \$1,039,210 (4.1% of the total budget.) SPS cut over \$1.0 million from its budget several years ago and those cuts, like most budget reductions, have never been restored. That means as we create scenarios to consider now, we are forced to include teachers, programs and key instructional and support staff. This is more than a belt-tightening exercise.

One scenario to balance the budget would be to eliminate 21 teachers. That is not likely. A scenario that may be considered, however, includes the elimination of up to 12 classroom teachers, plus may eliminate elementary instrumental music from the school day, reduce custodial/maintenance staffing, curriculum support and central office staff, along with eliminating Curtis after-school activity buses, and technology repairs and equipment. Clearly class size rises. Elementary class sizes of 26-29 will exist; middle school class sizes of 27-30 are inevitable. A very different climate will exist.

The structural deficit that the Town and Sudbury schools are facing creates an important choice for voters on Monday, March 26, (then, if approved, also at Town Meeting on April 4). Regardless of the outcome of the election, we will continue to work hard to provide the best education possible for our children. If the override is approved, the level of staff and programs will remain at current levels and our improvement efforts will continue to move forward. If the override is not approved, the magnitude of the deficit precludes simple solutions that do not include the classroom. Class size, programs, services, supervision and opportunities will be very different from this year. This is not a time for hand-wringing or threats of disaster ahead. The structural deficit is a reality; the economy, tax laws and costs for benefits, energy and employee contracts are what they are. A choice that reflects the real tension between school budgets and property taxes is yours to make.