

Newsletter 08-08/09 April/May

I wanted to wait until after town meeting to write the April newsletter. However, the defeat of the override, the work necessary to finalize a budget balancing plan, determining who would be laid off and then personally meeting with each teacher to deliver the message, results in my newsletter being the April/May edition.

I was asked by a reporter after the election if I was disappointed with the outcome. I thought of several sarcastic or curt responses, but followed my instinct to take the high road. Well, I'll confess to you that, yes, I was disappointed. Disappointed because we will be losing over 22 full-time-equivalent teachers, assistants, and other staff members who have contributed to the quality and improvements we have made over the last five years.

Disappointed because time that could be spent on improving teaching and learning, will now be spent on determining how best to deliver a quality education with different and limited resources and a different staffing allocation.

Disappointed because my self-critical nature keeps reminding me of all of the "should haves" that might have changed the outcome or at least changed the tone of the discourse leading up to the election and town meeting. Disappointed that of all the overrides in the MetroWest area, ours has been the lone defeat.

Disappointed for those who worked so hard to get information in the hands of the voters, who helped explain a complex ballot and why a decision by the town to hold taxes lower this year than voters approved, caused next year's increase, without an override, to be larger than just 2.5%.

While disappointed, I was not surprised by the result. I heard the comments being made; from those who believed the schools needed to act more like private business and "tighten the belt in these times", and comments from parents who just felt they could not vote 'yes' one more time, and those who focused on the economic and operational aspects of SPS and LS, not on the quality, outcomes or products.

So the results are in and our reality set. Next year's \$27.02M budget will be just \$13,000 greater than this year's, and we are working through the implications of the staff and expense cuts. It will be different next year, we will not be doing some things we've done in the past, but school will open on September 4th, kids will come to school with smiles and high hopes, and there will be a very professional staff of educators here to greet them and work hard to help them learn and grow. You will hear no excuses; while we will not be doing some things we have done in the past, we will maintain high expectations for students and staff.

I will be sending a communication to every parent very soon outlining the final reductions, cuts and fee increases. I would like to comment here on a couple of related issues.

Fees: The school committee recently approved an increase in transportation, sports and school activity fees for 2008-09. This was a difficult decision because we all believe that education is a public good and should be fully supported by the community and state. However, when the magnitude of the necessary cuts and reductions became apparent, raising fees to cover the cost of non-mandated, non state-funded transportation (those who live within 2 miles of school and all grade 7 and 8 students) had to be considered. Likewise, current fees for middle school athletics do not cover the cost of the programs, so these fees were increased to fully offset the costs. Finally, activity fees for clubs, drama, and select music groups were increased to help offset the costs of offering these opportunities for students. The final decision came down to a choice between cutting the programs altogether or raising fees to cover the costs; we opted to allow our students to benefit from the programs if they choose. We recognize that these fees may place an increased financial burden on many families. I want to remind everyone that it is our commitment that no student is denied the opportunity to participate because of inability to pay. If you, or someone you know, needs assistance, please contact the school principal. This request always remains confidential.

Donations: Some parents have asked if they could raise or donate money for the school district to hire staff to mitigate the impact of the budget cuts. The school committee is currently reviewing the district's policy around donations (actually this commenced prior to the election). While the intent is noble and so reflective of the generosity of SPS parents, the decision to accept such targeted donations is far more complex. In some ways it is not good public policy. Again, education is a public good and must be supported by state and local funding. Beginning to rely on donated funds from a limited set of parents to offset the implications of failed overrides reinforces what those who do not want to pay for education desire. Education then becomes a private good and that raises a myriad of equity, sustainability and decision making issues.

Parents as volunteers to replace laid-off staff: Again a noble and generous offer. There is no question that we could not have become the school district we are without the support of parents. From recess/lunch assistants to library volunteers to field trip chaperones to special program volunteers, parents are a wonderful asset and resource. With the elimination of kindergarten assistants and 1st grade literacy (Genesis) assistants, we will have to assess how parents can support the teachers and classrooms. We will be working with teachers and principals to think through the complexity of this issue. Contract issues, liability, confidentiality, consistency, sustainability and teachers' needs are just some of the factors that must be considered.

Redistricting. Periods of financial constraint cause you to look at what you are doing and how you do it. SPS is no different. We continue to look at energy conservation measures to limit the resources used for facility operations so that they can be used in direct services to students. The same is true for our transportation and several other programs. This spring the School Committee will appoint a Special Committee to examine our attendance boundaries and school organizational structure (i.e. grade levels in a given school building) to

ensure that we are providing equity in opportunities and efficiency in the use of resources. More information will be forthcoming about this committee and your opportunity to serve or provide input into the process. I was asked if this initiative is because of the failed override and the honest answer is...kind of. It has been apparent for some time that we might need to make some modifications to our attendance boundaries, but the financial condition of the district heightens the need to maximize our resource utilization.

Why the specific cuts identified? Why not other positions or expenses? We went into the planning for a non-override budget with our eye on the long term. We wanted to hold on to as much of the core program and opportunities for students as possible. We wanted to maintain as much of what has contributed to SPS's quality. Experience shows that with the exception of teachers, most cuts are never reestablished. The 2008-09 school year will be a time of retrenchment and a time to reflect on the key drivers of the quality of the system. We do not believe we are at the point of dismantling the system or making wholesale modifications. Nevertheless, significant cuts are necessary and decisions have to be made.

When making tough decisions, it is natural for well-intentioned people to differ on how best to meet the challenges. Those differences and, the resultant questioning and suggestions are good consequences of an otherwise uncomfortable and worrisome time. If this override defeat is a signal of things to come or a trend in town, then we will address that in the future. If that time comes, even if it is next year, we will make even harder decisions that will have deeper implications and it may then be a time to rethink what the public schools of Sudbury will be. That's not where we are now. Since reestablishing culture and program is far more difficult than eliminating it, we are holding to our larger objectives and will continue to strive to Improve on Excellence.

In conclusion, it's time to look forward. How can we work together to make SPS the best place possible to learn and grow? It is time for people to speak up, take back the agenda, listen to each other and change the discourse from accusatory and vitriolic to inquiring and respectful. To paraphrase a quote from Martin Luther King, we must be concerned not only about the vitriolic words and actions of some people, but for our own silence and inaction in response. Things may be different in SPS next year but I can promise you that I will not be silent about our continuing quest to Improve on Excellence.

John