

SUPERINTENDENT'S REMARKS
CITIZEN'S BUDGET ADVISORY WORKSHOP
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2010
PEARSON MIDDLE SCHOOL MEDIA CENTER - 7:00 P.M.

Good evening, and thank you for coming to the second Winchester Public Schools Citizen's Budget Advisory Committee meeting.

Last Tuesday night (February 2) was an interesting event.

I left the meeting significantly troubled, and I spent a good deal of time thinking about where the district is and where it is going.

Before we begin our work tonight, I feel that it is important that I share some of the thoughts that have been going through my mind since we last met.

I have had an epiphany, in other words, a revelation. In theology, a revelation is delivered by an angel.

My epiphany was delivered by people that I will characterize as angels. I am going to name names, and some of you may be surprised by who I have included.

One of my angels was Dr. David Cressy, the Superintendent of The Gilbert School. We had a brief meeting on Tuesday afternoon and before the meeting started, and knowing that I was headed into this year's first Budget Advisory Committee meeting, he wished me well. He smiled, and said he wondered how I kept my spirits up as I continued to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Another angel was my school board Chairperson, Kathy O'Brien. At a recent meeting, she commented that it appeared that we were in a race to the bottom.

Yet another angel is a teacher for whom I have great respect, Ms. Lynn Attella. I met briefly with her yesterday. She told me that we spend too much time worrying about money and not enough time focusing on education. She said that she feared that the light had gone out in the lighthouse. I respectfully disagreed and responded that the light may be flickering but that it could only go out if extinguished by the residents of the Town.

This morning I had a meeting with another angel, Cathy McCurdy. She is a staff member who is trying to do two jobs at the same time, those of being the Secretary and the Typist for the Academy. I have watched her work hard and know that she represents the many staff members with whom I work on a day-to-day basis who put their own personal needs aside in order to serve the children of this Town.

Yesterday morning, I sat in front of a group of fifth graders, all of them angels. I had been invited to read a story to them as a part of Read-Aloud Day. I loved their attention and their interest. They reminded me of the work that has been so important to each of us. You know that I believe that people who are engaged in the educational process have a vocation, a calling.

During Tuesday night's meeting there was a lot of discussion. One of my angels was Ms. Marsha Sterling. In one of her comments, she mentioned that she was concerned that I would bring forward a School Improvement Plan for the Hinsdale Elementary School that might not be able to be funded into the future and that would lock the district into a level of expenditure it could not support. I know that I'm paraphrasing, but I think I got the gist of the message.

As I was leaving the meeting, I had a brief discussion with another angel, an elected town official. During that conversation, it was

impressed upon me that, like every other department in this town this year, the school district was being held to its budgetary bottom line and there was is no room for over-expenditure. I certainly understand why that comment was made and I will make comments later in this presentation that I hope will clarify where I think we are to date.

A part of that discussion included a statement that this town is unlikely to support anything more than a half of a mill increase in the tax rate for the coming year. The town official had seen our first budget draft. It clearly indicated that we needed more than that amount. I responded that I could not even imagine how we could get to a point where we could continue our program with an increase of only \$250,000. Again, with all due respect, I understand why the statement was made, and I understand the fact that I must get people involved in this process if we are to bring about change.

Therefore, the epiphany: if you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.

I have been told that the definition of insanity is doing what you have always done and expecting a different result. I sense that I am certifiable but I don't believe I'm insane.

We started this budget process exactly as I had started it for each of the last three years and yet I am hoping for a different result. Something needs to change, and the change is beginning tonight.

I am indebted to each of the angels I have mentioned above, and many others, for this epiphany. The revelation would have likely not happened were it not for their honesty and forthrightness.

This year, 2009 – 2010, the school district is operating on a budget that in fact is spending less town money than during the 2008 – 2009 school year. In spite of some discomfort, I continue to believe that we have a stronger instructional program than we have ever seen before. I understand the discomfort to the staff, parents, and, in some cases, students. But, I keep reminding myself what the district would be like if we were operating in the mode that we had in 2008 - 2009 with this year's budget. It would not have been a pretty sight.

At our last meeting, we spent a great deal of time talking about this year's budget. My intent was to have those present, and the community members who were willing to watch the taped program, understand just how financially strapped we are at the present time. We have a balanced budget. This has been accomplished with the help of the federal ARRA funds and careful management by an experienced business office staff. The Board of Education has been patient, but some members have understandably expressed some concerns about the things we had planned to do but in all likelihood cannot be accomplished this year. This budget is, and was of necessity, underfunded. I have no doubt that representatives from the Town could make the same statement.

A budget is a plan. Let me repeat - a budget is a plan. During the development of this year's budget, we were in the midst of making a decision about reconfiguration and at the same time dealing with the need to have a zero tax increase for the second year in row. Some things were left out. They dealt directly with instruction. One thing was that in the Reconfiguration Plan we had anticipated five, sixth-grade classes. Somehow, we only budgeted for four.

We recognized a need to have reading and numeracy specialists in all of our grades but did not budget for the reading numeracy position at the kindergarten level.

We anticipated bringing an additional social worker on board to work on improving student attendance. We budgeted for a person at an entry-level salary. We did not recall that we had a person on the recall list who had been laid off during the mid-year budget crisis last year. This person had to be offered the new position. We are fortunate to have this person accept the offer. The salary was more than the amount for which we had budgeted.

We have encountered a larger number of people signing on for health insurance benefits because so many spouses have been laid off from jobs in other organizations.

The federal government has increased the length of time that people are eligible to collect unemployment insurance.

We opened school with more new high cost Special Ed. students moving into the district in August and we have had three additional students enroll during the year.

If it was not for the funds that are available through the Federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant, we would be in trouble at this moment. We are not. We are balanced.

We have just passed the 100th day of this school year. We have 80 school days left. It is my fervent hope that there are no additional surprises.

And so, we began the development of a school district budget for the year 2010 - 2011. The budget draft that we presented two nights ago is as badly underfunded as the budget we are currently

operating under. Even with our efforts to contain costs, three areas had generated an approximate 5% increase in expenditures and, on top of that, we are facing a reduction in revenues. The overall impact was an anticipated increase of 8.4% - this translates into \$1,661,809.12.

If the message I received from one of my angels is correct and remains unchanged, this district will be required to remove more than \$1,400,000 from a budget that is clearly underfunded and that will not need the needs of children in this town.

Where would these reductions have to be made?

We are a service industry. The largest number of dollars is in salaries.

For illustration sake, once unemployment was taken from the average teacher's salary, you would save approximately \$48,000.00 per teacher. It would take a reduction of at least 28 teaching positions to reach \$1.4 million dollars. Our entire teaching staff at the present time is approximately 90.

Please follow this. If we have 115 students in a grade level, and we have 5 teachers at each grade level, the current class size is 23 students per class. If the number of teachers per grade level is reduced to 4 teachers per grade, the class size increases to 29 students per class.

If you remove one teacher per grade level, a total of 9 teachers (grades K through 8), you would still have to remove another 19 to reach a total of 28 teachers.

Increased class sizes and reduced teacher support means lower student achievement.

I now need you to look at the re-drafted budget that is being handed out at the present time. It has been changed to add back items that I mentioned above that are currently being paid for out of this year's ARRA grant funds. It adds some things that should be a part of our budget, and it increases some areas like building maintenance that should be increased. It does not do everything that should be added or done.

This re-draft increases the bottom line from the \$1,661,809.12 or +8.4% presented last Tuesday night, to \$2,038,452.19 or +10.3%. Over the next six weeks, I will be working with the district staff and the Board of Education to reduce this number and this percent of increase. Some decrease is to be expected because this is a draft, and there will be some savings and additional revenues uncovered. It is unrealistic to expect that we can continue to operate the programs and services currently in place with an additional \$250,000.00. Nickel and diming every line item is not going to change the picture very much.

We are at a crossroads. It is time for this community to decide whether or not it is going to support its children and give them a fighting chance to compete in an ever-changing world economy.

Will we continue to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic?

Remember, if you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always gotten.

Change will not happen without your help and support. If you don't get involved, or you don't show, you, in effect, are voting no.

You decide.