

**Jeff Thielman's Statement on the establishment of a Subcommittee to negotiate a
contract extension with Superintendent Nate Levenson
September 25, 2007**

I am voting for this motion, and in a minute I'll speak to why I'll be making that vote.

First, I want to thank everyone for coming tonight and for expressing your opinions about the Superintendent's contract as well as the other issues raised in public participation. I am grateful to the many people who have taken the time to write letters, make phone calls or send emails to all of us regarding the Superintendent's contract.

It is a privilege to live in a town that values vigorous and passionate debate.

I cannot pretend to know what every Arlingtonian thinks about the Superintendent, but I do know that a decision to extend or not extend the Superintendent's contract cannot be a popularity contest. Such an approach to educational management would be detrimental to teaching and learning in our town.

While the School Committee is elected by the adult voters of the Town of Arlington, we have a moral and legal duty to ensure that the highest quality education is offered to all 4,600 children who attend our schools and to the thousands more who will come to the Arlington Public Schools in the future.

Tonight's vote is not about doing what is politically popular; rather, it is about making an educationally sound decision. The authority to hire, fire or extend the contract of a Superintendent is the most important responsibility of every school board in the United States. The people of Arlington elected the members of the School Committee because they believe we have sufficient experience in education and education management to do what's in the best interests of all the children of Arlington.

Three years ago, in September of 2004 when the School Committee began the process of searching for a new Superintendent, we knew we had a very good school district, but the majority of the committee and the public who came before us spoke of moving the Arlington Public Schools from good to great.

We knew that new ideas and approaches to the challenges we faced could bring our district to a new level of excellence. Some of us were concerned that we were not meeting the needs of all students in our Special Education and English Language Learner Programs; others were troubled that one in six children in our district in 2005 were not reading at grade level; and many of us wanted to find ways to provide more counseling services to our students.

In the past two years, Mr. Levenson and his staff have responded favorably to these and other concerns.

It has been said that this is really a debate about “how” Mr. Levenson has operated, not about “what” the Superintendent and his staff have accomplished. I do not agree. While mistakes may have been made with regards to process on some issues, I believe the core of the debate on whether to renew the Superintendent’s contract is about the changes that have taken place in the Arlington Public Schools during the past two years.

What we ultimately want from our Superintendent is the creation of K-12 education system that maximizes the potential of each of our young people. The Superintendent needs to be an architect and a system builder, a skill set that Nate Levenson has demonstrated during his brief time in Arlington.

Mr. Levenson deserves to have his contract extended because he has done what this School Committee, your elected representatives, asked him to do.

Building upon work that was being done in our schools when he arrived, Mr. Levenson and his staff oversaw the development and implementation of teacher-created common assessments, which give our faculty much better information on student progress than the MCAS.

The Superintendent and his staff found ways to channel more resources to help students struggling in reading and mathematics.

The Superintendent and his team have also made strides to address the serious issues identified by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in our English Language Learner and Special Education Programs.

Mr. Levenson and the District staff worked closely with AYCC (Arlington Youth Consultation Center) to provide improved counseling services to children in grades K-5. And Superintendent Levenson, Principal Skidmore, and Cindy Bouvier have developed a program to address the needs of students at Arlington High School who face drug, alcohol and mental health issues.

Finally, I am pleased with the principals and department heads hired by Mr. Levenson. I think they are people of great integrity who are committed to providing the best education possible to our children. They have made it clear to us that they want Mr. Levenson to stay in Arlington, and they want stability in the Arlington Public Schools.

I recognize that some oppose the Superintendent because of the decisions he and the School Committee have made in recent years. It is not easy to make cuts and increase fees in order to save teaching positions and programs.

But, the financial challenges we face will not go away by simply hiring another Superintendent. In fact, the more time we spend fighting with each other is less time we spend building the foundation and structure for funding programs that help our children.

Has Mr. Levenson been perfect? The answer, of course, is no. None of us is perfect. But he has learned from his mistakes, he's grown on the job, and he has worked hard at getting to know the unique challenges of Arlington and our public schools. He has become a better learner and a better listener, important qualities in any educational leader.

Most significantly, Nate Levenson has withstood an onslaught of criticism from many loud voices in the community. Some Superintendents might have walked away, but Nate Levenson has made it clear that he wants to remain in Arlington because he is committed to doing the very best he can for all our children.

Tonight's vote establishes a subcommittee to negotiate a contract extension. Within the next few weeks, I understand the subcommittee will come back to the full committee with a contract for our review and approval.

What's important, now, I think, is that starting tomorrow, the 44,000 of us who live in the 5.5 square miles that is Arlington, Massachusetts, find ways to understand each other a little better so that we can come together for the good of all our children.

Thank you.