

## **The Superintendent's Merit Pay Plan**

Last March the School Committee approved a contract with Superintendent Nate Levenson that included an adjustment in his salary based on performance goals and objectives. The yearly goals Mr. Levenson set for the District are approved by the School Committee, and the progress the District makes on these goals is the primary means by which Mr. Levenson is evaluated and reviewed each year.

In addition to achieving the goals, the Superintendent is still responsible for doing the management work traditionally expected of the Chief Executive Officer of a school district. This includes administering curriculum and instruction, selecting textbooks, hiring staff, organizing and reorganizing personnel, and ensuring compliance with state and federal laws. In large organizations such as school districts lofty goals are set at the beginning of the year, but leadership often can get mired in day-to-day management issues. In some institutions, governing boards are busy with various crises and spend little or no time evaluating the organization's progress on goals.

The merit adjustment clause in Mr. Levenson's contract is designed to ensure that substantial progress is being made on the District's yearly goals. If all of the goals and objectives are met, the Superintendent will receive a 10% bonus, and if the District fails to meet the goals, his salary will be reduced by up to five percent. It is rare to enter an employment agreement where one's base salary is in jeopardy of being cut for failure to achieve goals and objectives, but the School Committee and Mr. Levenson are serious about making a very good district one of the best in the state.

Last fall the School Committee approved five goals for the 2005-06 school year:

- Implementation of the Special Education and English Language Learner reforms mandated by the state. This includes some reorganization of both departments.
- Implementation of essential standards in math, reading, writing, science and social studies. Achieving this goal mean parents, students and teachers will have a much clearer sense of what children need to know in grades K-12 in these core subjects.
- Providing highly effective and focused professional development opportunities for our teachers in order to keep their skills up to date and to ensure that students receive a quality education.
- Determining what content knowledge, skills, and habits of mind will best prepare our students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A debate is raging nationwide about what students need to learn in order to prepare for a world in which they are likely to change jobs and careers multiple times.
- Creating a transparent, easy to understand budget.

At our first meeting in January, the School Committee established a process in which Mr. Levenson will receive up to 20 points for achieving specific measures associated with each goal. The maximum number of points he can achieve is 100, and each point is equal to one tenth of one percent. If less than seven points are earned for any one goal, no

points are awarded, and his salary is reduced by one percent. Any bonus paid to Mr. Levenson will be based on the number of points attained. If, for example, he is awarded 60 points, he'll receive 60% of the ten percent adjustment minus any percentages for failure to achieve a minimum of seven points for any one goal.

At our biweekly meetings, the School Committee will receive reports, review survey results and interview faculty and staff to determine whether each measure is being met. The merit adjustment process ensures that the District focuses on each goal, requires transparency to the public of the school district's work, and sets up a significant monitoring role by the Committee.

The Committee will receive reports indicating whether changes mandated by the state in the Special Education Department are met, and we will review results of a survey of parents to see if they see improvement in the District's responsiveness to their children's needs. The development of a specific plan for faculty professional development will be received and reviewed, and we will examine surveys completed by faculty to determine if this year's professional development program is effective. Determining what our children need to know to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require an analysis of our current course offerings and a report detailing and justifying desired skills needed for success. The budget will include clearly defined line items with back-up information as well as a survey of whether the document is useful and easy to understand.

We urge the public to participate in the goal evaluation process in the coming months. Special Education parents are encouraged to complete surveys this spring, teachers will need to complete questionnaires evaluating professional development, and Town Meeting members and the public should carefully review our budget documents. We ask members of the public to write, email or call us with your views on how the district is doing on each goal as well.

For the process to work, the Committee must review carefully every presentation and presenter that comes before us in order to ensure that the District and the Superintendent are moving forward. Ultimately, the merit pay process works if we perform our oversight responsibilities well.

A set of goals with a merit pay adjustment for the Superintendent is entirely new to Arlington and rare in public school districts across the country. We found no district nationwide that cuts a Superintendent's pay for failure to achieve specific goals, and we learned of only a handful that awarded their chief executive officers a bonus.

We will learn much from this experiment in the coming months and years. If we administer the merit adjustment process fairly and effectively, we will improve education in Arlington and will set an example for school systems across the country.

*Jeff Thielman is the Chairman of the Arlington School Committee.*