

Jeff Thielman: STAND FOR CHILDREN PRESENTATION– MARCH 3, 2005

Thank you to Barbara Goodman, my colleague on the School Committee, and Liz Monnin of Stand for Children for organizing this important event. Tonight I want to talk with you about the school department's budget and the need for a Proposition 2 ½ override to make up for the town's and the school department's structural deficit.

The benchmark year in the Arlington Public Schools was 2002-03. Back then an elementary school child had the opportunity to study Spanish, have meaningful art classes, receive the attention of a reading specialist if she needed it, meet with a social worker if a problem arose at home or in the classroom, and enjoy the services of a librarian at an accredited library in her school. Middle school students studied in appropriately sized classes, and the high school offered many electives that engaged students in their learning.

The 2003-04 school year was very different. In June of 2003, we were forced to cut 58 full-time equivalent positions from the school department. If you've ever worked in a school, you know the more quality adults you have in the building, the better the school. It's that simple. The layoffs meant we severed forever the ties our kids had with favorite teachers, social workers and librarians. It meant programs that children had come to trust and expect were eliminated. Our system simply did not have the resources it needed to serve our children as well as it did in the past.

To make up for lost programs, we relied heavily on parent volunteers, and we raised money privately to hire back some staff, including reading specialists. The effort was admirable, but we learned that we cannot rely on volunteers and private fundraising to run a public school system.

When the cuts came in June of 2003, the School Committee scrutinized its budget and cut costs where possible. During the past two years we looked closely at every program and made some difficult decisions.

We had a challenging negotiation with the Arlington Education Association that resulted in a savings on health insurance for the town and increased teaching time for some of our teachers, two concessions that were not easy for our teachers to make. We increased fees for sports and musical instruments, and some of us wonder if we increased fees too much.

We did some pretty mundane budget analysis as well. For example, we looked closely at our maintenance budget and found that it was pretty lean.

We looked at ways to reduce out-of-district placements for special education and spent a lot of time last year examining whether or not we should close a school. Whether this year's override passes or not, we'll continue to look for ways to use taxpayer's dollars better.

Last year when we began to plan this year's school budget, we argued that if we did not get a fair increase from the town, we would take our needs to the floor of Town Meeting. We were able to convince town leaders to increase our budget by 7.64%, or about \$2.5 million. These funds were used to restore the Academic Challenge and Enrichment or ACE program, add art back to the elementary curriculum, fund elementary reading specialists, offer elementary gym twice a week, and restore some high school electives. Our staffing went up by 25 positions, making up less than half of the positions we lost the previous year. Despite the staffing increases this year, we still did not have the elementary librarians, social workers, Spanish program, fifth grade science coordinator, high school electives and many of the support staff that we needed.

We are proposing a 6% or \$2 million increase for next year. About 65% of that increase or \$1.3 million will go for salaries. The remaining funds will add more staff to accommodate increasing enrollment. Funds will also be used to finance state-mandated positions, including MCAS tutoring and English Language Learner instruction. With this budget, we will be able to increase our staffing by about 16 people, giving us 551 full-time staff. This is just 17 fewer people than we had in 2003, but we must remember that we are educating nearly 100 more students than we had in our system in 2003. We are not back to 2003 service levels in our schools, but we can get a little closer if our proposed budget is funded.

Let me talk for a few minutes about the override. Last summer when we started our budget planning, we realized the town would be facing a significant shortfall for the 2005-06 school year. Some of us on the School Committee began conversations with a few people who opposed the 2003 override attempt, and over time we enlisted their support for an override this year. We all agreed that the town faced a structural deficit because state aid to Arlington was cut by 19% since 2003. I'm very proud that the

coalition we are forming for this override is made up of people who opposed and supported the 2003 attempt.

I recognize that \$6 million will at best sustain us, and it will challenge us from a budgeting perspective. The plan we're adopting calls for 4% increases in operating expenditures and 7% increases in health care costs over the next five years. The 4% limit essentially covers pay increases for the staff we'll have in place next year. The health insurance limit will make us work hard in next year's negotiations with our teachers.

The plan relies on state aid increases, and I agree that we should put the pressure on the state to restore cuts to municipalities. Like many people in Arlington, I don't want property taxes going up forever.

If the override fails, we'll be cutting \$2.6 million from our proposed budget. The shortfall will be made up through staff and program cuts and perhaps some fee increases. Once again the children in our schools will not receive the education they deserve. Our children get only one chance at fourth grade, one chance to be an 8th grader, and one year to enjoy their senior year of high school. We cannot take these critical experiences away from them.

To sustain our town and to continue to provide our children with the quality of education they deserve, all our citizens have to come together for the override. The property tax increase will not be easy for many in town, but I've found that people with the fewest resources are often the most generous. People who struggle to make ends meet, people scraping by to provide for their children and themselves, and seniors on tight incomes will be the most generous and the most supportive during the override effort. They will support the override because they know how important school and other government services are to everyone who lives in this town.

A generous spirit by all will be needed to carry the override forward, to sustain our schools and to allow us to stand tall for our children. Our children and our town deserve nothing less. Public education is the sacred responsibility of everyone in Arlington, and I am convinced that providing high quality K-12 education to all is something Arlingtonians want regardless of whether or not they have children in the town's public schools. I see a lot of goodness in the people of this town, and I believe they are ready to do what is necessary to support their schools.

Thank you for your time this evening. I look forward to your questions.