

State of the Schools: May 16, 2005
Jeff Thielman, Chair

On behalf of my School Committee colleagues Sue Sheffler, Suzanne Owayada, Marty Thrope, Paul Schlichtman, Susan Lovelace and Sean Garballey, I am honored to welcome you to the annual State of the Schools address.

Before I speak about our schools, I want to take a moment to recognize Kay Donovan, who is one of the longest serving superintendents in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. During her 11 years as the leader of our schools, Kay transformed our district into one of the finest in the state. She not only led the effort to rebuild our schools and Peirce Field, but Kay rebuilt Arlington's confidence in its public schools. Kay, from the bottom of our hearts, we thank you for all you have done for Arlington and our young people.

Next month two other school leaders are retiring, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Dr. Joanne Gurry, and the Director of Special Education, Dr. Marilyn Bisbicos. We thank both of you for your service to our children.

Many people volunteer in our schools as aides, coaches, and tutors. I want to take a moment to recognize one of our volunteers, long-time School Committee member Bill Carey, who volunteers about 40 hours a week in our accounting office. Thank you, Bill. It is volunteers like Bill who help make our public schools work.

Tonight, I want to talk with you about the achievements and challenges we face in the Arlington Public Schools.

Education is the most scrutinized public activity in America. The No Child Left Behind Law and the 1993 Education Reform Act here in Massachusetts made our schools more accountable and more closely watched than ever before in our history.

While mandates in education may come from the state or federal level, the mission of educating America's children is carried out in local communities like ours. It is the taxpayers in Arlington who must

support education financially and who must be sure that our town's children receive the finest education possible.

Over the years, the people of Arlington have been extraordinarily generous to the public schools. You have passed debt exclusions to rebuild our schools, and you have donated to support sports and other extracurricular activities. You have always been willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure that the children of Arlington receive the education they deserve. On behalf of everyone involved in public education in this community, I thank you for your support of our schools and our children.

Our schools are not perfect, but you should know that your tax dollars are well-managed. One way to measure whether a school system is operating efficiently is by looking at what it costs to educate each student. The taxpayers of Arlington will be pleased to know that we spend less per pupil than the state average, but we are able to deliver a superior educational product.

Let me share with you a few highlights of our schools.

While we in Arlington do not judge our students' academic progress by tests alone, we are pleased that our elementary MCAS scores are in the top 10% in the state. And overall our district is in the top 20%.

Our fine arts program is one of the best in the area. The spring musical production at Arlington High School is a highlight for many in the community. I'm always amazed during intermission at the spring performance to see so many people who do not have children in the production. When I strike up a conversation with them, they say they could not resist a great show for a good price.

Arlington's all-day kindergarten program, which is supported in part by your tax dollars and paid for as well by parents, gives children a running start on their educational journey. Participation in all-day kindergarten is very high, and our program is the envy of many in Massachusetts.

Our seven neighborhood elementary schools give children a safe and supportive place to learn and grow. The relatively small size of these

schools allows kids to receive more attention than they would in a larger school. The MCAS scores and high academic achievement of our elementary students are proof that having seven schools is the right choice for Arlington.

The Dallin Elementary School is being rebuilt with a combination of state and local funding, and it is expected to be completed by the winter of 2006. Thanks to your generosity and wisdom, the Town of Arlington has rebuilt six of its nine schools, and we remain committed to rebuilding the Thompson and Stratton Elementary Schools. Budget cuts at the state level have slowed us down a bit, but we have not lost sight of our goal of rebuilding every elementary school in town.

The Ottoson Middle School works to maintain the small school feeling of the elementary level by putting students in clusters where they can study and learn together. Throughout their middle school years our students are given the chance to explore trades, learn a foreign language, and take more advanced classes.

Under our new principal, Charles Arlington Skidmore, the high school is poised for a renaissance. Mr. Skidmore himself is teaching a class and has invited other teachers to observe him so they can learn together how best to teach the young people of the 21st century. Many of Arlington High School's graduates go onto some of the finest colleges and universities in the country, and one recent graduate, Sean Garballey, was just elected to your School Committee.

Many may not know this, but this year the town of Arlington pays for 150 students to attend Minuteman Technical School. The young people of Arlington who study at Minuteman are given a chance to learn trades as well as prepare for post-secondary studies. Without Minuteman, many young people in Arlington would not stay in high school.

What makes education work in Arlington is the strength and talent of our teachers. Mr. Skidmore tells me that in his 30 years in education he has never worked with a faculty as dedicated as the staff of Arlington High School. He is impressed by how much time they put in before and after school and how many of their own resources they use to make their classrooms work. Our elementary principals and our middle school principal, Stavroula Bouris, say the same about their staff.

To show how dedicated our teachers are, last year they settled a contract by increasing their health insurance costs by 50% to reduce the burden on the town. And they agreed to have some of their colleagues increase their teaching class loads by 25%. They reached this agreement because they care about our kids and because they want every child in Arlington to receive the best education possible.

We are lucky to have such dedicated teachers working with our children every day.

Education today is not the same as it was when many of us were growing up. I suspect your educational experience was similar to mine. We had 30 and sometimes 35 kids in a class when we were young. If you remember, about 20% of the kids just didn't learn the lessons. And in those days, that was accepted. A college degree was not so clearly tied to financial security as it is today, and there were no federal mandates telling schools to leave no child behind.

Today we live in a different world. Young people with learning disabilities, those kids who simply would have flunked out or barely gotten by when we were in school, are now mainstreamed and receive the attention they deserve. The smaller class sizes that you the public demand for your children and grandchildren allow all kids to learn better. And they keep our special education costs down because children with diverse needs get the attention they require in a smaller class.

In Arlington 16%, or 750 children, are designated as special education students. By law, the taxpayers of Arlington not only pay for special education children in public schools, but our tax dollars are used for special education students from Arlington who attend private and parochial schools.

I doubt there is a family in Arlington who is not touched by special education. Your child or grandchild or your neighbor's child may be on an individual education plan. We in Arlington support these children not only because the law requires it, but because we are responsible for every child in this town, regardless of their learning ability.

The other day there was a letter from a special education parent in the Arlington Advocate. The parent wrote that her seven year old son with Down Syndrome is finishing his second year of kindergarten. He has an aide most of the day who helps him with speech, language and computer usage. His mother writes: “We see the loving friendships he has made because he attends his neighborhood school. We see his confidence at school and play. We see him thinking more clearly, speaking more clearly, gaining more mastery over his little world.”

Years ago this child would have been put in a special room, apart from his classmates, and he would have been forgotten. Today, this boy is part of our community, he cannot be left behind, and with your support he will have the resources he needs to reach his full potential.

The fact is, education in Arlington and across the country is better today than at any time in our history. We respond to students’ needs, diagnose learning issues, and provide a better educational product than ever before.

While we are doing better in education, we know we face even greater challenges as we prepare students for the future. Let me explain with a little story.

Last week I spoke to Farid Quraishi, the President of the student council at Arlington High School. He told me about a trip he took to Germany last year with parents and classmates. He and his friends raised money for the trip; no public dollars were spent on it. In a Berlin youth hostel he became friendly with a student from India. The two have maintained contact by email. Last December this young woman was just a few miles from where the tsunami hit, and she was able to give Farid and his friends in Arlington eyewitness updates on the struggles people in another part of the globe faced as a result of that terrible natural disaster.

The kids in our schools are growing up in a world that is much smaller today than it was when we were young. They will compete, get to know and do business with people from all over the world. In the past few years, as Thomas Friedman wrote in his new book, “The World is Flat,”

the world-wide economic playing field has become much more even, and it is no longer driven mainly by U.S. companies.

Educated people all over the world, with access to a computer and the internet, are able to connect to any knowledge pool they want 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. And since 1990, long after most of us were in school, three billion people in China, India, Russia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Central Asia have begun to participate in the global economy.

The jobs that have fled Route 128 in recent years have gone to places with well-educated people. If you have a question about your computer or your telephone, for example, chances are that you'll call an 800 number that will put you in touch with a skilled technician sitting in an office in India, the Philippines or another country.

Yes, economic times are tight, but we will not get out of our current economic challenges without an investment in education.

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, recently gave a speech to the National Governors Association, and he noted that in 2001 India graduated almost a million more students from college than the United States. Every year China graduates twice as many students with bachelor's degrees as we do, and they have six times as many graduates majoring in engineering.

So, what does all of this mean for Arlington, Massachusetts?

Five hundred more students are studying in the Arlington Public Schools today than five years ago. This is a 12% increase in a very short period of time. During that time, due to budget cuts at the local level and a reduction in state aid, our schools have seen a reduction of 9% of our teaching and support staff. If the override is not successful on June 11th, we will have 12% fewer staff than we had in 2001 with 12% more children to educate.

I ask you this. Can we honestly prepare our students well for a world where they will compete with young people in India, China and other countries if we give them fewer resources? Can we get them ready for a world that will not guarantee them lifetime employment if we cut the

text book budget, cut back on social workers, eliminate many electives and have kids sitting in study halls when they should be in a classroom learning?

I am convinced that we in Arlington and we in America are a people that do not shrink from challenges. We want our young people prepared for the 21st century, and I believe we are willing to do what it takes to make sure that happens.

To get our students ready for the future, our schools need resources, and we taxpayers can give those resources to our kids and our teachers.

My work takes me to schools in America's cities, where young people do not have all the advantages enjoyed by students in Arlington. I've learned, however, that at their core, the children of Arlington and the kids in Harlem, or the south side of Chicago, and or south central Los Angeles have much in common.

Young people in Arlington have had parents out of work for many months and sometimes many years, and they worry about their parents, their families and their futures. The children on the south side of Chicago see and feel the same thing.

Arlington's kids wonder if their favorite teacher or a social worker they've come to know and trust will be here next year, and kids in Cleveland, the poorest city in America, have similar fears.

The young people in Arlington, Massachusetts just like their peers across the country have a much better sense of the times we live in than most of us. They watch shows like "American Idol", "Lost" and the "OC", and then they log on to the world wide web and communicate with people all over the world.

Our students are trying to be patient with us adults. They understand better than we do that the world we face is changing more rapidly than at any point in our history.

They know they have special gifts and talents that are waiting to be unleashed, and they want desperately to make a difference in this world.

They want us to help them realize their full potential.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation says that American schools need to focus on the three Rs – Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships.

The first R, rigor, calls for making sure all students are given a challenging curriculum.

The second R, relevance, says that kids need to have courses and projects that clearly relate to their lives and goals.

And the third R, relationships, says that we must make sure that all kids at all levels have a number of adults who know them, care for them, and push them to do their very best.

We cannot achieve the three Rs in our schools unless we have the people and the resources to do it. It's that simple.

The June 11th override vote presents a critical choice for everyone in Arlington. Over the next five years the town's projected deficit is more than \$30 million. By managing our insurance and other costs well, lobbying for a restoration of the \$3.2 million in annual state aid we've lost, and increasing our property tax base by \$6 million, we can take care of most of this deficit.

What's important about this override is that we are doing this once and not coming back to you the taxpayers for at least five years. The School Committee, Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee have united to support a five-year fiscal responsibility plan that invests in Arlington and protects the taxpayers.

Some cities and towns in the state put an override on the ballot every year or every other year. That's not the way we want to do business in Arlington. We want predictability and stability, and this plan gives us both.

Last September my wife gave birth to our son, Aidan. Of course, this is a wonderful gift, but we soon realized how costly it is to raise a family here in Massachusetts. When news of the override came our way, we

thought long and hard about whether we could get behind it. The 10% increase in our property taxes will not be easy.

But then we realized how privileged we are to live in Arlington. How wonderful our parks are, how good our schools are, and how safe and well-run our town is.

To keep Arlington the Arlington we've come to know and love, we decided to support and work for the override, knowing that it would affect our family's finances.

Many in Arlington are wondering what to do on June 11th. Well, I urge you to do as you've done in the past. I urge you to invest in Arlington by voting yes. A Yes vote will sustain our schools, support our children and provide the services that all of us in Arlington have come to expect.

The children of Arlington and their parents have put a great amount of trust in us taxpayers. They trust us to support the schools, they trust that the schools will be safe, and they expect that our schools will prepare young people for an ever-changing world.

Every day the young people of Arlington come to our schools eager to learn and grow. Day after day Arlington's children believe in us and believe we will do right by them.

Now it is time for all of us in Arlington to unite in our resolve, to believe in our young people, and to invest in the future of both their education and our broader community.

Thank you.