

**A very good year in the Arlington Schools**  
**By Jeff Thielman**  
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As Arlington's 4,500 students begin summer break, it's worth a moment to look back on the achievements of the 2007-08 school year.

Thanks to the hard work of our teachers and staff, our district made a number of significant advancements this year.

The district expanded and improved the reading program in grades K-6. Building on past success, our teachers were able to provide more support for students who struggled and strengthen literacy skills for students across all subject areas.

Our principals created Teacher Assistance Teams at each school to identify and develop intervention strategies for students falling behind.

A major achievement this school year was the hiring of new staff and better coordination of support for students with social and emotional needs. Under the direction of Cindy Bouvier, the Health, Wellness and Counseling Department implemented a diversion program for students who were in trouble with the law, additional drug and alcohol counseling, in-house suspensions, more social workers, and continued the services of the Arlington Youth Consultation Center to complement work done by school staff.

At a recent parent forum sponsored by the Youth Health and Safety Coalition, Police Chief Fred Ryan praised Superintendent Nate Levenson for "bringing together the police, human services, and the schools to help students in need. For the first time, we are all rowing in the same direction," he said.

Important changes were made in our academic programs. The District's new Director of Social Studies, Kerry Dunne, led an effort to include a more global perspective in courses, and teachers created a more coordinated, less repetitive, K-12 Social Studies sequence.

Arlington High School implemented the first phase of the 21<sup>st</sup> century education program, which includes more oral presentations, more group/team work, and more international and cross-cultural experiences. Teachers are now working on an engineering and technology curriculum for students who want a more intense, project-based experience. The program will be finalized next year and implemented in the fall of 2009.

High School staff are developing a set of interdisciplinary courses and putting a greater emphasis on higher-order thinking in all subjects.

I ran into a 2006 graduate of Arlington High School recently, and she told me she could not believe how many new programs are available to her younger brother. “The high school has come a long way!” she said.

An important advancement is that the district is becoming a more unified, well-coordinated system of nine schools with a common curriculum, common assessments, and teachers sharing best practices. Unifying the nine schools into one system was a mandate given Superintendent Levenson when he was hired in 2005. We’re pleased that he has taken steps to reach this goal.

In the area of Special Education, the District has made significant gains and is continuing to work hard to improve services. In 2005, the Arlington Public Schools nearly lost state funding because of non-compliance with Special Education laws. Today, formal complaints to the state Department of Education have dropped from a high of 25 to zero. We are not perfect, but we’re getting better.

An improvement with the potential to save money as well as help students is the district’s effort to bring more traditionally out-of-district special education programs “in-house.” Some children have needs that the district has not been able to meet in Arlington, and we must pay for transportation and tuition for these students to learn in other communities. This year, five in-house programs were launched, and children who used to take long bus rides to and from school now have the opportunity to receive their education here in Arlington.

Finally, the School Committee reaffirmed its commitment to small class sizes when it passed the 2008-2009 school year budget with increases in fees. We took this difficult step after a survey showed community support to do so. It wasn’t easy, but the majority of the School Committee felt it was the price to pay to retain teachers and programs.

And, of course, we had many of the successes that have been the hallmarks of our schools for many years – first-class performances by various musical and performing arts groups, a number of trips by students to other countries, and a parade of graduates going to some of the nation’s most prestigious universities and colleges and to jobs for which they are well prepared.

We thank the teachers and administrators whose hard work and devotion made each of these achievements possible, and we look forward to more advances when school resumes in September.

*Jeff Thielman has been a member of the Arlington School Committee since 2003.*