

Difficult Choices for the Arlington School Committee
By Jeff Thielman

Each year at this time the Arlington School Committee along with our counterparts across Massachusetts face the same challenge. How do we meet the growing needs of our students with the limited financial resources under our control?

Prior to 2002, the cost per pupil in the Arlington Public Schools was above the state average. When the state aid formula was changed later that year, Arlington's funding was cut by twenty percent, and the town began spending less per student than most cities and towns in Massachusetts.

We still do not receive the same amount of funding from the state that we were given in 2002. The cumulative impact of the reduction in state aid is that it is becoming more difficult to provide above average education to our young people with below average resources.

While School Committee members will continue to lobby our legislators to restore the aid we lost, we have to work within the \$37.9 million allocated to us for the next fiscal year under Arlington's five-year financial plan. We are forced to make difficult choices.

If the Arlington Public Schools were to continue with current programs, keep all staff, and meet legal mandates for Special Education next year, we would face a \$1.25 million shortfall.

The Superintendent, our principals and department heads have proposed reductions in school supplies, textbooks, curriculum materials, and funds for substitute teachers. The budget projects a small increase in grant funding, calls for a cost-of-living adjustment in fees, and reduces several reserve funds. The Math department chairperson position, some clerical support, and a data analyst position are eliminated. Each cut makes it more challenging to run our schools well because administrators, support staff, new textbooks and sufficient supplies are critical components of a quality education.

The most painful cuts in the current draft of the budget are in our teaching staff. If the proposed budget is adopted by the School Committee next month, we will see a decrease of five elementary and four high school teachers.

While many of these cuts will be realized by retirements and attrition, the Bishop fifth grade and Brackett third grade will have three sections instead of four. The Hardy fourth grade, Stratton third grade, and Thompson fifth grade will consist of two instead of three sections. Next year's Dallin fourth grade will have two classes, just as it has this year in the third grade.

In each of these particular elementary grades, maximum class sizes will vary from 24 to 28 students, making it more difficult for our teachers to address the individual needs of our children.

Losing classroom teachers, particularly in the early grades, is very painful. In the next few weeks, with the public's help and input, the School Committee needs to explore ways to minimize these cuts.

One question for Arlington parents and taxpayers is whether the School Committee should take the extraordinarily difficult step of increasing fees beyond the 5% cost-of-living adjustment proposed in the current budget. While politically difficult, such a move could save some teaching positions.

Arlington's all-day kindergarten fee is \$1,875 per student while the state average for all-day kindergarten is \$2,500. Instrumental music fees of \$225 per year currently cover half of the cost of the program. Students pay \$210 for the first sport they play, \$160 for the second sport, and the third sport is free. We cover about 90% of the cost of the lunch program in our schools and would have to increase what we charge students for meals to cover all costs.

Fees are burdensome for many families, and School Committee members do not like to levy or increase fees for public education. No student, however, has ever been turned away from playing a sport because she or he cannot pay a fee. This year, in fact, approximately fifty fee waivers were granted by the Athletic Department. In addition, 100 families pay reduced amounts or no fee at all for all-day kindergarten.

The school budget is supposed to reflect the priorities of our community. In good years, this means the School Committee must ensure that extra revenues are applied in areas that people in town feel are important. In bad years, we must decide together how to allocate the pain.

I urge people in Arlington to examine the proposed budget and suggest ways to address this year's shortfall. I've presented ideas here but do not pretend to have all the answers.

Please be sure to come to the School Committee's annual budget hearing on Tuesday, February 26th at 7:30 p.m. in the 6th Floor of Arlington High School, and please take a moment to complete an on-line survey posted on the School Department's website that provides people with options for addressing our shortfall. The School Committee needs to hear from you before we take the difficult step of passing next year's budget.

Jeff Thielman is a member of the Arlington School Committee.