

Smart Budgeting for Arlington Schools **By Jeff Thielman**

For the past two years, under the leadership of chairs Suzanne Owayda and Paul Schlichtman, the Arlington School Committee has looked closely at how the school department spends taxpayer dollars. Each year, with little fanfare, we brought school administrators and department heads to working meetings to review selected parts of our budget. Together, school committee members and administrators examined line item expenditures and looked for ways to run our system more efficiently.

Budget reviews can be dry affairs, but every member of the School Committee agreed that they were an important part of our job. In fact, long time member Barbara Goodman called our work a “best practice” that should be shared with school committees across the state.

In the fall of 2003 we took a close look at whether it made sense to close an elementary school since many citizens had urged us to look into this potential savings. We held a working meeting with principals to examine class sizes at the elementary level and to discuss the ramifications of a school closing. Last January the committee voted unanimously that a modest annual savings of less than \$200,000 was outweighed by the educational benefits of having seven neighborhood schools. Furthermore, the increasing size of the elementary population made the seven schools a necessity. We ended where we started, yet the process was a good one for our schools and our town.

We had a working meeting with principals and department heads to discuss increasing fees for music, sports, and extracurricular activities. After a public hearing and some intense debate, the committee voted to increase fees for varsity sports, musical instruments and the rent we charge groups to use our facilities. The committee also voted to keep the all-day kindergarten fee at \$1,500. While the program is not mandated, it provides children with a more comprehensive beginning to their educational journey. Increasing fees was a tough choice, and in the past year many parents have told us that they contribute an average of \$1,000 per year in supplies and fees for their children’s public education. No School Committee member feels good about that.

This past year we examined school maintenance costs, which represent approximately 10% of our total budget. According to national standards, the school department has just enough custodial and maintenance staff per square foot, though we have fewer personnel than a nearby community. Any reduction in staff would put Arlington schools in the “unacceptable” category under federal standards. In other words, we looked at ways to cut the costs of cleaning and maintaining our buildings and found no way to do it without endangering kids. Analyzing the number of people we have mopping floors is not glamorous work, but it is the kind of scrutiny we give our budget.

During the fall we had a working meeting with principals and department heads that analyzed the budget implications of implementing district goals and performance

objectives approved by the committee the previous spring. The session was critical to helping the school department craft the fiscal year 2006 budget.

The School Committee's most difficult budget work was our negotiation with the Arlington Education Association (AEA), the union that represents our teachers. Suzanne Owayda, Superintendent Kay Donovan, and I were the school department's negotiating team, and with the full backing of our colleagues, we fought for several important contractual changes that had town-wide ramifications. Teachers worked most of the year without a contract, and negotiations were so intense that it took a state mediator and an 18-hour marathon session to avoid a strike.

First, the AEA accepted a reduction in the town's contribution for health insurance. Arlington had been paying 90% of the costs of health insurance for its employees, and the union recognized that the town could not tie its financial future to the rising costs of health insurance. The teachers agreed to an 85% health insurance contribution from the town, with a 15% employee contribution. After we reached this agreement with the AEA, the town's other collective bargaining units settled for a similar split on health insurance, saving Arlington hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Second, for a long time our English teachers had been teaching four courses, while their peers in other subject areas taught five. Beginning with the 2006-07 school year, all of our teachers will teach five classes, freeing up funds in the high school budget for electives and other programs. Once again our teachers were willing to look at personnel costs and make adjustments. We thank them for their leadership, and we know the concession they made were not easy.

For the 2003-04 school year, we were forced to cut or reduce many programs including elementary Spanish, librarians, social workers, the Academic Challenge and Enrichment Program (ACE), high school electives, and elementary reading specialists. Some programs, including the reading aides, art, music and gym, were partially restored this year. If the School Committee's proposed \$34.2 million budget is approved this spring at Town Meeting, a few more of the programs we cut will be restored. The schools, however, will not be back to the level of services and programs they enjoyed during the 2002-03 school year.

Despite our hard work, Arlington faces a structural deficit because annual aid to the town from the state has been cut by 19% since 2002. We've worked hard to scrub the budget and raise revenue wherever possible, including an average of \$3 million in grant funding each year, but we still face budget shortfalls that must be addressed.

The news from the state and federal governments is that suburban communities like Arlington must solve fiscal problems with their own resources. We will do what we can to lobby the state for more assistance, but this deficit is Arlington's to resolve. While the School Committee is committed to taking a careful look at our budget year after year, we cannot perform financial miracles. As Arlington's taxpayers begin to consider a potential June override vote, they should know that the School Committee has reduced costs and is

committed to finding more savings in the future. Still, the quality of our schools and our town services will depend on additional revenue as well.

Jeff Thielman is the Vice Chair of the Arlington School Committee and the Chair of the Budget Subcommittee.