

The Sudbury Public Schools provides its students with an excellent education. We see this in many ways that cannot easily be measured – and in ways that are measured with imperfect yet often useful tools. As we strive to improve the education provided for every student, we look to our own internal assessments, to statewide assessments such as MCAS, to research about effective practices, and to best practices used in other districts.

The decisions we make about how we provide educational services are necessarily intertwined with our decisions about how to spend our scarce resources. We use benchmark data from other districts to inform our budget decisions, comparing costs within similar program areas. It can be helpful for all of us, as parents and voters, to consider how we compare to other towns and other school districts in the choices we make in allocating our resources.

The Massachusetts Department of Education provides significant comparative data concerning how school districts spend money based on its uniform reporting requirements. Each district must report expenditures within thousands of subcategories; this information (in addition to other data such as enrollment categories, testing results, etc.) is used to compile district profiles. These district profiles are available to the public on the [Massachusetts Department of Education](#) website. Given the highly specific reporting requirements, direct comparisons can be made across the reported categories. The Division of Local Services of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue also reports municipal finance information (from average property taxes to average police and fire salaries) found in its [Municipal Data Bank](#).

When looking to other districts or towns, we tend to focus on those that have characteristics similar to Sudbury. Relevant comparisons are provided in the SPS budget presentation and in the [Benchmark Data Report](#) available on the SPS District website. The SPS District is one of the few preK-8 districts in the Commonwealth – and the largest. The other preK-8 districts provide useful comparisons, because the costs for educating high school students tend to be higher than for students in lower grades. This report includes other preK-8 districts as well as high-performing districts of other configurations in our region.

The DOE information shows that the Sudbury Public Schools spends significantly less per student than other similar districts and less than the state average, despite our very high performance on MCAS and other performance measures. Our costs per pupil are generally lower in several of the reported categories (including administration, operations and maintenance, and materials, equipment, and technology) and somewhere in the middle for other categories (including professional development and insurance and retirement).

The comparisons also demonstrate that the SPS ratio of students to teachers (this includes teachers in all categories including specialists and counselors) is one of the highest in the region; each of these professionals is responsible for more students in our district as compared to other districts. DOE comparisons show that our teacher salaries are lower than the state average and lower than in any of the comparable districts in the region. The latest DOE data available (from fiscal year 2006) is consistent with surveys of regional teacher salaries and benefits conducted by the Sudbury Finance Committee in 2004 and 2005, finding Sudbury on the low end of the districts. Finally, we see that both the percentage of our students on special education plans and the portion of our total budget devoted to special education costs are typical of other districts.

These comparisons are valuable – but with certain limitations. Sometimes, the data may raise as many questions as answers and thus require further exploration. For example, a district with a large number of school buildings or with older school buildings may reasonably have a higher maintenance budget compared to otherwise similar districts. Or, one might note that the percentage of our district's total budget spent on special education costs (21.7%) is typical of most districts, but is higher than Lincoln's spending of 16.8% of its budget on such costs. Yet, this may not mean that we spend more per special education student than Lincoln; this proportion also reflects that Lincoln spends much more on every student. For fiscal year 2006, Sudbury spent \$9,851 per student, while Lincoln spent \$15,651 per student. Thus, typical special education costs turn out to be a lower portion of the total budget in Lincoln. These are just a few examples of the type of inquiries that may arise from benchmark analysis.

We use benchmarking data for several purposes. In general, these comparisons provide information about the costs of education across Massachusetts and about the ways that other schools are handling costs that increase faster than available revenue. The variations across districts raise questions that may be explained by particular characteristics of each district, but may also point to areas where we can learn and improve. While these measures do not begin to define the strengths and weaknesses of a school district, they are one of the tools we use in making informed decisions. As you review these benchmarks, you may have questions as well. Please feel free to contact any of us for further explanation or discussion.

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