

February 2009

Greetings from the Sudbury School Committee:

In the midst of the worst economy to ever confront us, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the important work of the Sudbury Public Schools continues without pause. This is, of course, as it should be. The students of the SPS must – and will - be prepared to meet the challenges that they will face in the years to come. While all involved seek economies through various proposals, including a reasoned and thoughtful examination of consolidation proposals that Sudbury has seen before, in our view, the focus on educational quality should never be lost. To be sure, this Committee, which oversaw the termination of more than 22 full-time positions last year, understands the self-evident calculus that when you cut people, you cut costs. Cost savings, however, are not the only result of such terminations. In a District that has a lower per pupil cost than almost 2/3 of the Districts in the state, they have a damaging impact that can properly be viewed as outweighing any related cost savings.

In the view of the Sudbury School Committee, our role – in part – is to ensure that the residents of Sudbury have the information that they need to make informed choices about the relative worth of cost savings verses program cuts that will occur in the absence of adequate funding. In an effort to provide such information, the District website was recently updated with a Frequently Asked Question [FAQ] section which can be found at <http://www.sudbury.k12.ma.us/faq.html>. These questions have been drawn from questions that have been heard over the last year or so and which tend to arise in the context of budget discussions. This year, as your elected representatives, we have taken proactive steps to provide accurate information. The list of FAQs is by no means comprehensive. There will likely be questions that arise that have not been addressed or disturbing rumors. Please bring them to the attention of a School Committee member and we will work to get you the accurate information that you need. Our names and contact information are on the District website.

In the current budget cycle, there are more variables in play than usual, including the uncertain availability of federal, state and local revenues. Given the uncertainty that currently exists, we ask that you continue to pay attention to these important issues that will have a direct impact on Sudbury's children and the Town as a whole. For our part, we will continue our efforts this year to provide information in a timely manner.

### **Anti-Bullying Update**

With that, we turn to our annual report to the community concerning the District's anti-bullying program. This report comes later this year than in previous years. On an operational level, this program is overseen by the District's

Wellness Coordinator. Due to last year's budget cuts, this position was cut significantly with a resultant direct impact on this program. Nevertheless, a survey of our students was conducted in an effort to get data related to the bullying problem in our schools. Students in each of the schools were surveyed with differing participation rates. On balance, the data collected reflects that bullying in our schools remains an intractable problem and remains in line with national statistics. While the survey asked 18 separate questions, one, in particular, highlights the problem. Students were asked to answer a question that would assess the percentage of students who reported being bullied regularly (daily/1-2 times per week). The results were as follows.

Frequency of Bullying -- percentage who report being bullied regularly (daily/1-2 times per week)

	2006	2007	2008
Haynes	11.75%	10.66%	11.76%
Loring	15.25%	10.83%	15.7%
Nixon	9.66%	9.56%	11.6%
Noyes	16.83%	12.16%	12.0%
ECMS	15.4%	11.6%	12.6%

If these percentages are applied to the whole SPS population, 13% of our students or 404 out of 3167 are subject to bullying on a daily or weekly basis. Given the well-known impact of such conduct on the ability of victims to learn, such a state of affairs is obviously unacceptable.

As noted at greater length in our November of 2007 newsletter, the District's anti-bullying initiative began in 2005. While the experience of other Districts suggests that a few years are necessary to achieve worthwhile results, our numbers remain disturbingly flat. Accordingly, in light of this year's data, we will continue to assess the effectiveness of this program, the way it is being implemented and potential changes to it, including a possible reallocation of resources, to ensure that the important goals of this program are met. In the meantime, we ask that you work with us to address this bullying problem by talking with your children about appropriate behavior both in and out of school. Let them know what will not be tolerated. Perhaps more importantly, let them know what they need not tolerate. All SPS employees know what is expected of them under this policy, but they cannot address a problem until it is brought to their attention. You should never hesitate to contact Superintendent Brackett's office or any member of this Committee about this type of issue. Nothing is more important than the safety of our children.

### **Full Day Kindergarten**

For several years, the SPS has been looking at the issue of full day kindergarten. Such a program has space implications that impact any analysis

concerning the need for redistricting. About three years ago, the Committee adopted a goal of working toward the implementation of a full-day kindergarten program in light of these significant space-related issues. Such a program makes sense for many reasons including the recognition that early childhood education is one of the areas where you get more return on your educational expenditures. Some studies have concluded that a dollar spent at this age level can save significant resources later. Moreover, such programs take advantage of a limited developmental window during which a strong educational foundation in reading and literacy can be laid. At the time of the adoption of this goal, enrollments continued to rise and space for any such program was a serious impediment. The Committee's analysis of the space issue about 2 years ago concluded that we were 10 classrooms short in connection with the implementation of such a program.

At its most recent meeting the Committee continued its ongoing efforts to meet this goal in the current climate of a flat enrollment. It was reported that with certain changes in the use of space in the buildings, a number of classrooms could be freed up for such a program – but not enough to implement a program that would accommodate all kindergarten students in a full-day program. Such a limited program raises several issues that must be carefully considered. Among them are:

1. Concerns that any such program be revenue neutral or perhaps revenue generating. While no decision has been made as to how additional revenues would be used, one possible use for such revenues might be to expand the program to meet expected future demand.
2. Concerns that the availability of any such program be equitable from school-to-school. For example, if Loring students would have a 60% chance of getting into full-day kindergarten by lottery, students in other schools would need to have the same percentage chance of enrollment.
3. Tuition would need to be equitable and would likely be based on a sliding scale state model for early childhood programming.
4. Space which is made available must be sustainable based on future expectations regarding enrollment and program costs.
5. Coordinating with Sudbury Extended Day to avoid, insofar as possible, causing problems for parents who are dependent on its services.
6. Balancing the needs of students who are ready for such a program with the needs of those who are better suited to the current \_ day program.

Implementing such a limited program runs the obvious risk of failing to please everyone. In particular, those who want to take advantage of it but can't due to space limitations are likely to be disappointed. Failing to implement such a program, if feasible, however, would miss the opportunity to provide the

educational benefit of such a program to a significant number of students. While the issues noted above, and others, may ultimately result in this proposal not being implemented for next year, the Committee has asked for and will be discussing other information related to this program at its next two meetings. These will be held on February 25, 2009 and March 11, 2009. It is expected that a vote on implementation for the next school year will be held at the March 11, 2009 meeting.

Lastly, on February 26, 2009 at 7:00 p.m. at the Curtis Middle School an informational forum will be held in connection with the full day kindergarten proposal.

Please feel free to contact any members of the Committee with questions or concerns.

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For the Committee