

Fifteen Months Later ...

Dr. Charles Ormsby



My intent was to send out a progress report at the one-year mark, but when the time came (March '04) it seemed particularly inappropriate. Why? Because we were in mid-budget deliberations and almost all of my report would have been inconclusive. I would rather discuss progress made or, if need be, failure than merely say, "we're working on it."

The School Committee's efforts for the 2004 school year are now concluded so a report is in order. As always, I take full responsibility for the opinions expressed here. I hope this report and my observations will further a rational discussion of how we can improve educational outcomes in North Andover.

Money, Taxes, Budgets, Etc.

Since the School Department spends over \$30,000,000 of the Town's budget, this is a topic worthy of some discussion. I have made it well known that I don't consider budgets to be the most important topic for furthering the educational outcomes of our students. That being said, the budget we approve does reflect our priorities for those items that do bear a price tag. By focusing on the budget, however, we often restrict our attention to these issues/items while ignoring even more important issues/items that have little or no budgetary impact. I will concentrate on these, more important, issues after summarizing the outcome of our budget deliberations.

If I were to sum up the result of our budgeting process this spring, I would say that:

- We are going into the next school year with a better and stronger budget/educational plan than we did last year at this time, and
- This was accomplished with a budget that is smaller in real terms. (To be precise, our budget allocation from the town rose approximately 1.4% to 1.5% in absolute dollars, but fell by somewhat more than this in inflation-adjusted dollars per student.)

Also, with the seemingly inexorable growth of the state-mandated Special Education Program (now taking nearly 1/3 of our budget, but benefiting only 11% to 12% of our students), the budget pressures on our Regular Education program are substantial. Developing a plan that is an overall improvement (from an educational perspective) under such conditions is a major accomplishment.

Dr. Harutunian and his staff deserve an immense amount of credit for this accomplishment. Under his leadership, the school department was able to identify savings in some programs and revenue generating opportunities in other programs. In addition, one-time revenues were also found that cushioned what many believe will be the toughest budget year of the current economic downturn (the only time that one-time revenue should be used to shore up operating expenses).

Dr. Harutunian's budget was also a substantial improvement over previous ones in its transparency and clarity. After developing a "level-services budget" (which was well-above expected funding levels), Dr. Harutunian and his staff developed a prioritized list of over \$4 million in suggested cuts that could be made if necessary. Over the course of approximately ten School Committee meetings, Committee members (with substantial public input) undertook the task of ratifying some cuts while restoring other expenditures ... and ultimately established a budget aligned with available revenues that avoided any need for a property tax override.

At the end of the process we were able to plan for a modest increase in staff salaries, while adjusting spending priorities to fund the following major improvements in our overall educational strategy:

- Added 5 teachers to the High School (where student populations are increasing) which, among other things, will allow us to restore science labs that had been cut last year
- Added part-time curriculum leaders to the Middle School and a full time curriculum coordinator to the Elementary Schools (with a focus initially on mathematics)
- Provided three foreign language choices in 8th Grade (Spanish, French, German) and made these foreign language courses full-fledged academic subjects. This is a switch from having part-time language instruction for several years — an approach that was considered to be ineffective. Now students can take 5 years of foreign language as a full-time academic discipline (8th through 12th grade).
- More realistically budgeted for Special Education, reducing the probability that we will need to ask for additional funding next spring.

After considerable discussion and reflection, the School Committee passed the final budget with a unanimous vote. While I believe Dr. Harutunian deserves special recognition, I believe our district staff, the budget parents, the School Committee, and all community members that participated deserve accolades for this effort.

Encouraging Greater Academic Achievement

I addressed this topic at length in my "Six Months Later" letter last September. A year ago last spring, the School Committee began an initiative to substantially raise the level of academic achievement in our schools. A committee of administrators and teachers was formed (along with myself as an ex-officio member) to look at the current level of academic challenge and what it would take to raise expectations and outcomes. In fulfilling this charge, the committee surveyed all of our High School and Middle School students and their parents. Also surveyed were our teachers and seventeen other academically high-performing school districts. Finally, the committee investigated a concept called "vertical teams", supported by The College Board's Advanced Placement Program, to improve curriculum coordination across grade levels and encourage greater student participation in Advanced Placement courses.

The results of these surveys were eye opening. Several conclusions were inescapable:

- Students were under-challenged in all subjects in our Middle School (where most courses ranked about halfway between "minimally" and "moderately" challenging). In our High School, most courses scored less than "moderately" challenging.
- Our students want more academic challenge and are willing to strive for greater achievement.
- Parents concur with the lack of academic challenge cited by the students and are also willing (~95%) to support the schools in placing greater academic demands on their children.
- Parents want the schools to set higher standards (~93%). Both students and parents want the schools to encourage students to attempt courses having more rigorous academic objectives.
- Only 0%-5% (depending on course level) of our teachers think we assign too much homework.

- We enroll a substantially lower percentage of our students in Advanced Placement courses and our scores on Advanced Placement exams are below the level of the seventeen selected schools surveyed.

Based on these findings and studies that show that North Andover's academic results are below those that would be predicted by our town's socio-economics (e.g., per-capita income, median home prices, and other demographics), the School Committee has recently developed a set of academic benchmarks (i.e., goals) that we want to meet by the 2008/09 school year. Let me briefly outline how our suggested academic targets were set:

- **First, we established the metrics to be measured:** Ten MCAS scores, two SAT scores, and three percentages (% taking SATs, % graduating, and % going on to 4-year colleges) ... **15 metrics total**
- **Second, we established a range of reasonable targets** for each of these 15 metrics. At the "high end" we averaged each of these metrics for the 15 **best** academic towns in Massachusetts. If we achieved these targets we would rank approximately 7th in the state academically ... pretty lofty company. For the lower bound on goals, we identified towns that were similar to North Andover socio-economically and then cherry-picked the best 8 academic towns from those that were similar. Averaging the 15 metrics for these 8 towns gave us targets that, if met, would lead us to an academic ranking of approximately 27th in Massachusetts. Compared to our current ranking of 67th, even these lower targets would represent substantial improvement.
- **Third, we chose academic targets within this range.** We wanted to set goals that were both challenging and reasonable and thus we selected goals exactly halfway between the upper and lower bounds described above. If achieved, North Andover would rank approximately 15th in the state.
- **Finally, we set a target date and intermediate milestone expectations.** We targeted the 2008/09 school year to achieve these goals and set equally spaced milestones for the intervening years.

In the School Committee motion that established this 5-year goal setting process, the Committee also established an important rationale for the process. The following are taken directly from the motion that passed the Committee unanimously:

- "These goals are established with the recognition that the primary responsibility of our school system, consistent with the safety, health, and good citizenship of our students, is to encourage their intellectual development and scholarship. With this as context, it is the Committee's intent that these goals form the primary objective of the North Andover School District and that the Superintendent take those steps necessary, within his scope of responsibility and authority, to pursue these goals with a target date of the 2008/09 school year."
- "It is the intent of the School Committee that these goals be viewed as a catalyst for improvements in our educational processes and that they provide a continuing context for future decision-making."
- "Finally, the School Committee requests that the Superintendent routinely inform the School Committee of the district's strategy and plans as they evolve in support of reaching these goals, including information related to indicators of progress as such data becomes available."

. These goals serve multiple purposes:

1. To make a clear and official position statement that we intend to improve academic outcomes and that the status quo is not acceptable.
2. To indicate how much improvement we believe is needed and how quickly we want to achieve it.
3. As "requirements" that will drive needed process changes: "To achieve that, we must do this".
4. To support innovation and lead everyone to question "business as usual" and "sacred cows".
5. To monitor performance and measure progress.

Finally, it is important that we hold everyone accountable for a serious pursuit of these goals. That includes school personnel (School Committee, Administrators, and Staff), our students, and parents. The standard excuses ("other schools don't do that." or "that's not how public schools operate." or "we've never done that before.") are not acceptable responses to suggestions that support progress toward these goals. The stakes are too high.

While many would consider the setting of goals to be a "no-brainer", let me state unequivocally that setting explicit, quantitative, measurable, and scheduled goals focused on improving academic achievement in a public school system is revolutionary. We have a new beginning in North Andover and we have a chance to do something extraordinary. We just need to keep our efforts focused with unwavering commitment.

Elementary Mathematics Curriculum ... a near-term target for improvement

One of our focused initiatives is to substantially improve our mathematics curriculum in the elementary grades. Our district's mathematics MCAS scores are woefully deficient and a review of our current curriculum makes it clear why this is so. We now use the TERC "Investigations" math curriculum that stresses student discovery of novel methods to perform basic arithmetic operations (numbers and fractions) while assiduously avoiding actually teaching/explaining the standard techniques we learned in our elementary years. When our students exit 5th grade, they are often unable (without a calculator) to multiply multi-digit numbers, perform long division, or manipulate arbitrary fractions. Unless taught at home or by a tutor, absence of these skills often becomes the stumbling block that precludes students from advancing in science and mathematics in Middle School, in High School, and in college. How many promising careers are ended by the time our students exit third grade? Far too many.

This spring, our elementary teachers identified mathematics as the number one curriculum area to be addressed. As a result, this summer a team of teachers (with support from an outside consultant) are working to identify several promising replacement curricula that will then be piloted this fall. The curriculum evaluated as being the best will, according to current plans, be adopted in all of our elementary schools in the 2005/06 school year. This, along with focused professional development in mathematics teaching, should significantly improve our results in mathematics.

Community and Staff Support

I want to conclude by asking you and your families to openly support these initiatives. We cannot accept "business as usual" or "low expectations". The futures of over 4000 students hang in the balance. We need all of our:

- **Students** to expend maximum effort in their academic pursuits,
 - **Parents** to stress the importance of academic achievement with their children and to be fully engaged in their student's quest for academic success,
 - **Teachers** to encourage academic excellence, to set very high academic standards, and to strive to be outstanding instructors,
 - **Administrators (with support from the School Committee)** to break the old rules that impede the achievement of extraordinary results.
- It must be made clear that academic leaders who contribute to the academic success of their students will be recognized and rewarded.

- **Community members** to support the focus on improving academic outcomes and to maintain an expectation of success by holding everyone accountable.

Thank you for your continuing support. Please call me if you have any questions or concerns related to the above or wish to discuss any other issues.

Sincerely,

Dr. Charles Ormsby, North Andover School Committee Member, (978) 682 8569

A progress report from Dr. Charles Ormsby, member of the North Andover School Committee – July 2004