

Remarks for Board of Selectmen's Meeting
January 18, 2011

It is the School Committee's duty under state law and the Town Charter to propose a budget to Town Meeting. We still don't have final figures from the state or revenue figures for the Town. As in the past, the School Committee will work with the Finance Committee to let Town Meeting know what financial options will mean as the figures of support from the State and revenue from the Town become more certain. Town Meeting has always shown strong commitment to education, even in difficult times.

There has been misunderstanding in Town Hall, I think, about the budget we sent to go to Town Meeting. The School Committee voted to submit a budget for the December 31st deadline at a level to inform the Town of the financial needs in the School Department to maintain programs and personnel at current levels and to catch up on deferred items that detract from the education of our children and increase costs to the Town. This is mostly deferred maintenance. We all know that, in our homes, it's more expensive to fix something than to maintain it. It's even worse in government!

At the end of last Town Meeting, we were made aware of the intention of the BOS and TM to reduce the school budget for this year. This was not based on hard data, but rather an intention to do so. We see our responsibilities as including telling the Town what our schools needs are, being mindful of economic conditions. In better times, the budget requests have included improvements in programs and facilities, but certainly not this year.

I want to emphasize that the figures you see in our budget request are a realistic view of the funding that our schools need just to keep from falling behind.

Tonight's meeting can be used to develop a general agreement between the Selectmen and School Committee on how we can get through this very difficult year without compromising educational programs and services. We were pleased to have Dr. Rizzi attend meetings with department heads at Town Hall as one tool to have us all working together, but in no way should anyone misunderstand our respective roles and responsibilities from her presence and cooperation. A five percent budget cut for the schools to pay for increases in other areas of town government is both unfair to our children and against

the historical cooperation in preparing budgets. We have to work together, not at cross purposes. We all serve the same public.

One perfect example of how this cooperation could work is for a town-wide approach to controlling labor costs. Like the Selectmen are doing with the municipal unions, the School Committee is in negotiations with the teachers and other school unions. Although I can't get into details of negotiations or strategy, I think it's obvious that – just like municipal employees – our school employees would like higher pay and better benefits. We just do not have the money at this time for this any more than the municipal budget can afford higher labor costs. I hope we all see the economic problems facing Stoughton the same way in that, with finite resources and many fixed costs, the only way for some of our employees to receive raises might be for others of our employees to lose their jobs. I know all of us on both boards struggle with the fairness of needing to let some employees go in order to fund raises for other employees. Our boards should develop an overall approach to this problem.

One person who is leading by example is our Superintendent, Dr. Rizzi. Did you know that our Superintendent of Schools has waived her salary increase under her contract for the past 2 years as a contribution, as a public servant, to helping us get through these hard times? I want to publicly acknowledge and thank her on behalf of all of us for setting such a good example. If we had more public servants setting this kind of example, we could be much further along in addressing tough issues.

When we voted on this budget and evaluated our programs, we didn't do this in a vacuum. For the children, at each grade level, we do our best to meet their needs and prepare them for the 21st Century. If this recession teaches us anything, it is the value of education. We know that unemployment has hit hardest for those with the least education. For our children, the education they receive from us today will affect them well into the future. To be successful, our schools need to be very good at helping children find subjects that interest them – to help them find a career path – and to give them skills to not just survive in the outside world, but to prosper. We can't accomplish this without good, dedicated teachers; skilled support staff; books; equipment; and buildings that function well. When we do this, the entire town will also prosper.

You have to agree with me that mediocre schools that don't prepare our students have never been acceptable in this Town and they should not be acceptable now. I am concerned that this is exactly what will happen from an arbitrary decision to cut this school budget by \$2 million.

Whether it is reading, math, science, or some other area, not all children develop at the same pace. We are charged with educating all of them. We can't support instruction the way this Town has historically done to meet these needs with deep budget cuts. Dr. Rizzi can speak to this better than I can, but we presented our budget with the very solemn obligation to prepare our students in mind.

Many of our buildings are not in good shape, because we haven't funded maintenance like we would have wanted to in recent years, to preserve the instruction side of the budget as the economy got worse. This budget tries to fix some of these problems. These buildings are where we send our children to spend the better part of their day, and where we have hundreds of employees. These needs were made clear in the Facilities Master Plan Report. Our facilities say a lot about how we value our children and employees. The kids can see the condition of the facilities. Visitors to the town, people and businesses that consider locating here, look at the schools and what their condition says about how we value education and commitment to the children.

For the town as a whole, we are also very aware that good schools are important to the town across the board. Good schools drive up property values, and not-so-good schools drive them down; towns with good schools tend to have less crime, better qualities of life, and are generally better places to live. Businesses locate in these towns. Communities with better schools have many fewer problems involving unsupervised and bored teens.

For our children, this is their time to learn the skills for life. For our town, we will dig a deeper hole by weakening the schools by unwise levels of cuts. We will see property values suffer, a less anchored population develop, and this will lead to a town we won't recognize as the Stoughton where we want to live. We are just kidding ourselves by thinking otherwise.

So when we talk about improving the town image, a subject that received a lot of press over the past year from the Board of Selectmen, we ask you to bear in mind that nothing will say more about how

this town is moving in the right direction than keeping our support for education strong. At the same time, nothing will say more about how Stoughton is once again on the wrong course than if we hollow out the school budget. We all know of towns that have made the wrong choices in education funding, and towns that have made the right choices. Let's work together so we make the right choices now.