

First Selectman

From: Michael Dubreuil <dubreilm@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, May 16, 2023 10:18 PM
To: First Selectman; Denise Turner; Deborah Bates; Rosemary Coyle; Jason LaChapelle
Cc: Andrea Migliaccio; Tim Vaillancourt; John Thomas; Mike Egan; Mike Hayes; Art Shilosky; BOE@colchesterct.org
Subject: Board of Education Budget

To the Board of Selectmen,

The purpose of this communication is to ask you to perform your duty in accordance with the town charter: set a date for town meeting and referendum on the education budget.

My understanding is that a letter writing campaign has begun asking you to send the education budget back to the boards for modification. These citizens are telling you that the BOF has made drastic cuts that underfund education. I don't believe the BOE has provided information that substantiates this claim. Sending the budget back is unnecessary. For the last several months both boards have been working on a budget, consistent with the town charter, and you have their result.

In the future the BOE should use this letter as guidance for future interaction with the citizens; because unfortunately I believe the citizens have lost control over our school system. The citizens are asked to further open their wallets with no authority over the performance, features and capabilities of our school system. Those decisions are left to bureaucrats with no accountability to the citizens. I don't believe this can be solved in a month.

Although I believe the BOF approved BOE budget is too high, I don't think it will change any minds at the BOE until they see their budget fail at referendum. Please just send this budget forward. Let the citizens vote.

Vox populi, vox Dei.

Michael Dubreuil
Woodbine Road

Preamble:

I'd like to begin this by thanking the members of the Board of Education for their volunteer service to their community. We may not agree on everything; however, I will always respect your dedication to your community. This letter may seem extremely critical of you personally. I can't help that. I can say that I believe the foundation of the problem relies on decades of institutional inertia and not the failure of one board member. We need to "think differently", and this letter is intended to spark that conversation.

For the past decade it feels as if the performance of the school system has been in freefall. We have seen reduced academic test scoring. We have seen central office staff grow in numbers. The number of students enrolled has decreased by over 30%, while costs to educate each student has increased at a higher level. One has to ask, have we lost control of our school system?

I think you have your answer when you look at the 2023 budget season. On April 26, 2023 the BOE sent a letter to the BOF indicating their priorities in regards to spending cuts. The BOE made the choice to cut 4 Kindergarten teachers to save \$237K from the budget. This would mean cutting full-day kindergarten to half day. Completely absent from this list of cuts were any cuts to administration. What would the priorities of the citizens look like? Would they prioritize a second superintendent over full day kindergarten?

Let's be serious though... The citizens do not actually believe full-day kindergarten is gone. We've seen this game before. This BOE budget year has been similar to recent years. The BOE proposes a significant spending increase. The BOF pushes back against the large increase. The BOE says that popular programs would be threatened if the spending increase doesn't go through. Both boards meet in the middle and a small to moderate increase is pushed to referendum. In the end, the popular programs that were threatened are not cut. It would seem there had been a compromise. Was there compromise or was there actually a failed extortion?

For years the Board of Education has been relinquishing authority to run the school system to the superintendent. This effectively surrenders the citizens's absolute power and authority to an unelected town employee. A town employee who isn't even a tax paying citizen of Colchester. There is no direct method of accountability for the conduct of the superintendent to the citizens. He is free to drive up the budget and make misleading statements to promote it. He will feel no repercussions for an excessively high budget; and in fact makes his job easier. The superintendent should not be making the budget decisions. He should administer the school system based on the decisions the BOE makes through the power vested in them through the citizens of Colchester.

Everyone knows this is true, and it was demonstrated this budget season. When the BOF asked the BOE what a lower budget would be for their operation- they had no answer. The BOE, our elected representatives to manage the school system, defers to the town employee (superintendent) in making the decisions on what to cut. The BOE doesn't do the work. They don't understand their minimum budget and they don't know what non-mandatory items to cut. Those cuts should be guided by the priority of the citizens. The BOE can't do that, because the BOE never bothers to elicit community feedback on what the the priorities of the citizens are.

I mean this in the nicest way possible: when it comes to Colchester Public Schools, the inmates are running the asylum. I have never met an educator who wanted to spend less money on education. They always want to increase spending on education. To be honest, I'm not sure I would want an educator who prioritizes lower costs over increased spending on our students. However, that desire to spend money needs to be tempered. It's the responsibility of the BOE to incorporate the voice of the citizens to manage the features of our school system and ultimately to control spending.

Chapter 1: Defining the Problem

In the November 2021 election we saw a wave of Republican candidates win. Republicans had control of the First Selectmen seat, the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Finance and the Board of Education. Your RTC campaign pages are still up; the majority of you identified fiscally conservative concepts in your personal biographies. The citizens elected you with the belief that we would see fiscal conservatism return to the town. And let's be clear, fiscal conservatism is not owned uniquely by one political party. We have many fiscally conservative democrats and unaffiliated voters in town. They voted for you too.

This letter isn't intended for just the Republicans. We hear many times from citizens who didn't vote for Republicans that they need to be represented too. I'm sure there's citizens who would identify themselves as fiscal conservatives who voted for a Democrat. You may even be a Democrat who would personally identify as a fiscal conservative. The theme here is "fiscal conservatism" not red versus blue.

It's critical to remember the principle of fiscal conservatism and what it does not mean. According to Wikipedia, "fiscal conservatism is the economic philosophy of prudence in government spending and debt." The word "prudence" is important- it means "acting with or showing care and thought for the future". It does not mean gutting budgets for the sake of saving the taxpayers money. It means a thoughtful analysis of the minimum government services required, gauging the citizen's willingness to go above the minimum required, and then acting according to the citizens' will.

With respect to the 2023 to 2024 budget year it first appeared as though the stars had aligned. We had Republicans, who ran on a platform of fiscal conservatism, controlling all boards. We had a public school system that will be at our lowest level of enrollment in a decade. The belief among fiscal conservatives such as myself was that this would be a great year to "reset" our education budget. To understand the minimum services required, and then gauge the citizens willingness to exceed the minimum.

All hopes and dreams of fiscally conservative citizens began to waver when the Superintendent asked the Board of Education for an 8.99% increase. Those hopes and dreams were on life support when the Board of Education increased the superintendent's budget request. The Board of Education voted to send the largest spending increase ever to the Board of Finance: 9.83%.

Now I want to clarify that I carefully chose "life support" to describe our feelings at this point. The Board of Education is the most knowledgeable on the school system and when given the benefit of the doubt; perhaps they've embraced the concepts of fiscal conservatism. Perhaps this is the minimum budget required and they were just ready to share the information with us so we could all understand.

Unfortunately that wasn't true either. The Board of Education voted to deny information the Board of Finance was requesting. They wouldn't provide comprehensive answers to citizen questions that were critical of their decision making. In a very bizarre move the Board of Education appeared to embrace the government qualities of George Orwell's dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. On April 19, 2023 they sent a letter to the community containing the following, "Please consider the source of any information you have obtained, and keep in mind that you can access all BOE official budget documents on the CPS website." So apparently they will now act as the Ministry of Truth.

I want to emphasize how shocking and alarming the March 15th emergency BOE meeting was. A meeting that unlike most BOE meetings was in-person only; of which I personally attended. The purpose of the meeting was to respond to a request for information from the BOF. They asked their budget director, Rachel Linkkila, how difficult providing this information would be. She responded, "easy" indicating it was just a program that needed to be run in the town's budget software. Even though the request for information was easy to complete, the BOE voted to deny BOF their request. At the meeting, BOE members acted indignant with the request. They didn't allow citizen's comments because it "wasn't on the agenda". However, they did allow Democrat BOF Member Mike Egan to pontificate (also not on the agenda) on how they were under no obligation to provide the information. Which actually just stoked the division between the Republican controlled boards. Well played Mr. Egan and shame on Republican BOE members for not realizing what that was really about.

Two quick points:

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- Please help me understand how the community
- benefits from the business director position at BOE, if that person is prevented from providing easy to assemble information requested by the citizens? The citizens pay her salary... and she only serves the interests of BOE members and school administrators
- who may not even live in our community? I don't understand this at all. It's also just another example of how the BOE disrespects the citizens.
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- Some may call the decision to deny the information
- a "power move". I just don't understand how the BOE, a subordinate board to the BOF (in budget matters), benefits from denying budget information to the BOF. Imagine in your day job if your boss asks you to do something and you just say "no". This is unacceptable
- behavior.

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The problem is that the BOE and Superintendents have fully embraced grandiloquence. From their public documentation, to their emails, to their actual speaking style: there is a lot of information, however it lacks substance. The substance that would allow citizens and other boards to make informed decisions. The BOE provides information through a prism that allows them to bend the narrative to fit the Superintendent's desires and beliefs. That narrative is then used to rile up public support for an ever increasing top line budget number. For them, the advertised cuts may or may not be necessary; they are just a tool used to control public support. The superintendent has already made the choices on what to include and not to include in the school system. This isn't how we should be operating, this isn't an oligarchy; we have a representative democracy.

I'd also like to point out the problems with making the Superintendent the spokesperson for the education budget. I would like to contrast that with the recent political attacks against Finance Director, Mary Williamson, by Democrat BOF member Mike Hayes. Ms. Williamson is a town employee who is not the spokesperson for the town. Literally everyone in town, with the exception of Mr. Hayes believes she is off-limits for political attacks. When it comes to the school system, the BOE cowardly shields themselves from criticism by putting a town employee in front of the citizens as their spokesperson. It's unacceptable and unfair to everyone involved; because that superintendent is not accountable to the citizens.

Chapter 2: The Future is Fiscal Conservatism & Populism

You may not like this analogy but I think it's great. The people should vote on our school system the same way they purchase a car. They want to know the standard features, and then we can vote on the upgrades.

Here is the fiscal conservatism:

In the education world the standard features would be the minimum amount of spending possible. This means the minimal level of staffing required to meet the minimum standards based upon the proposed student enrollment. This means: teachers at their per-pupil contract maximum, a skeleton crew of administration and central office staff, zero non-required electives, the bare minimum in custodial and cafeteria staffing. The bare minimum everywhere. No arbitrary minimum as defined by the desires of the Superintendent or administrators. The bare minimum that would continue to allow state funding to continue (i.e. keep our town out of court.)

I would also point out that as state funding decreases, we need to consider which state mandates we embrace. There may come a point when the state reimbursement is minimal compared to the costs of unfunded mandates. The BOE should publish an annual report to inform the citizens when that threshold is reached.

Now don't get me wrong, that would likely make for a poor school system. I don't believe that's the school system Colchester wants. However, if we can't identify that number and share the data that created it with the public, we don't have all the information. That is the starting point of building trust and is the foundation of fiscal conservatism.

Here is the populism:

On a regular basis (5 to 10 years), the BOE should conduct a survey of citizens to understand what additional features they want in their school system. This should be more formal than Survey Monkey and may require significant cost to execute. However, getting the voice of the citizens is the most important part when setting the priorities of the school system. We seek the advice of the Superintendent and administrators; however, they don't make the decisions. They should offer information to the citizens guided by their formal education and years of experience... they don't make decisions on what to fund.

What are the "features" of our school system, and how do we present them? I will offer some examples. The costs and content should be considered fictitious; however, it should be a guide on what to put in the survey:

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- Full Day Kindergarten. Cost: \$300k
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- Band at JJIS. Cost: \$105k
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- Software Development elective at Bacon Academy.
- Cost: \$50k
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- Full Day Pre-K for all children ages 4 and up:
- \$400k
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- Class Size Enhancement for Kindergarten (class sizes of < 22): \$100k
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- Class Size Enhancement for Kindergarten (class sizes of < 17): \$250k
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- An assistant superintendent: Cost: \$210k
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- A business director for the BOE: Cost \$115k
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Allow the citizens of Colchester to guide the BOE to make the difficult decisions on what budget features to fund. Once you create an inclusive environment where the citizens can vote on features of our school system, you create buy-in for the top dollar number.

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First Selectman

From: SUZANNE SALEMI <sunflower522@comcast.net>
Sent: Wednesday, May 17, 2023 10:01 AM
To: First Selectman; Rosemary Coyle; Deborah Bates; Jason LaChapelle; Denise Turner
Subject: Request to send the Education Budget back to the BOF/BOE

Dear Colchester Selectmen,

I am writing to request that you return the education budget back to the Board of Finance and not advance it on to a Town Meeting. I believe that the budget was sent to you in haste, before all of the numbers and distributions from capital funds and audits were accounted for, and that the final reduction numbers weren't even finalized. With that, I feel that the education budget is too low. The cuts to programs are too drastic and will have lasting negative effects on the school system and the town as a whole. The Board of Finance and the Board of Education have more work to do to present a thorough budget that meets the needs of all members of the community. The budget that is before you was created in haste, after several lengthy, contentious meetings. Both Boards need to work to get this budget right so that when it does go to referendum, it will pass and we don't have the same situation we had last year with the town budget. Send the education budget back to the BOF and BOE and tell them to do their job!

Thank you very much,
Suzanne Salemi
96 Prospect Hill Road, Colchester

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