

The Value of an Education

What is the value of an education? This spring, we are once again faced with the uncertain fate of the operating budget for the upcoming school year (FY2011) for the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District. Both school and town officials are charged to present local citizens with responsible budgets that ensure quality services to children and adults. While preparing an operational budget is an ongoing challenge, this year the challenge is greater than ever before for schools and towns because costs are up, and revenue is down.

On January 30, the Whitman-Hanson Administrative Team presented a *level service operational budget* to the School Committee of just over \$48,000,000. At that meeting, attendees were informed that an increase in costs was necessary to provide this year's services to students and staff, next year. This year, in order to preserve educational quality and to save staff positions, employees took furlough days; teachers gave up course reimbursements for graduate level study; and custodial and maintenance staff voted to forego the purchase of new uniforms. Because these were one year contractual agreements for the 2009-2010 school year, these costs had to be included in the FY2011 budget. Consequently, costs are up!

Also presented in January was information indicating that estimates of revenue to cover the 2010-2011 level service budget are down. A major source of revenue for Whitman-Hanson's budget is Chapter 70, state aid to education, an amount that funds 51% of the district's operating budget. Although Governor Patrick proposed a state budget in January that level funded Chapter 70, legislators at the State House are currently recommending a lower amount for Whitman-Hanson. Lower than in the past are other state revenue sources: reimbursement for regional transportation and circuit breaker – money that offsets high special education costs. To date, the only additional revenue added to the FY2011 budget since January is the amount of \$800,000, which the Regional School Committee voted on March 10 to take from District reserves to help fund next year's budget. This allocation reduces reserves to \$800,000, an amount of 1.7% of the district's operating budget. School districts are permitted to have an amount of up to 5% of their operating budgets in reserves. Consequently, revenue is down!

The distressing results of rising costs and reduced revenue are the proposed reductions that will be necessary to balance the budget. The list of adjustments, the product of the diligent and thoughtful work of the Administrative Team, includes over \$2,100,000 in cuts from this year's services and resources. These adjustments impact everyone – students, staff, parents, and the community – with reductions in all areas and the loss of critical positions and services. In order to help reduce the number of employees who are laid off permanently, retirees' positions will not be filled, whenever possible, through a process called attrition. While the impact of attrition is not always evident, the consequences are devastating with larger class sizes, increased workloads, and reduced services. In the past eight years, the district has eliminated over 100 staff positions. Many of these have been the result of attrition. An example is the foreign language program which has been reduced significantly. When I arrived in Whitman-Hanson fifteen years ago, middle school students had the opportunity to take Spanish, French, or Latin. Several years ago, there was no foreign language instruction at the middle school level whatsoever. Currently, one teacher teaches Spanish in both middle schools to classes as large as fifty students.

On March 17, the Regional School Committee voted to present a 6% increase in the operational assessment to voters at their Town Meetings on May 3, an amount that could add \$880,858 in revenue to help fill the \$2,100,000 gap in the district's FY2011 operational budget. This year's budget was funded with no increase in the assessments. Each increase of 1% in the operational assessment adds \$146,810 to revenue or \$15.60 to the average annual Whitman tax bill and \$16.27 to the average annual Hanson tax bill. A six percent increase adds \$93.60 to the average annual Whitman tax bill and \$97.62 to the average annual Hanson tax bill. This means for every dollar paid in local taxes, taxpayers in Whitman would pay about 21 cents for education. Taxpayers in Hanson would pay about 17 cents for education.

Recently, uncertainty and school funding have been inseparable partners. Estimates of financial resources from the state and federal governments change on a daily basis. Towns struggle with reduced revenue and increased costs as well. Oftentimes, actual funding numbers aren't provided until long after school committees are required to vote on operational assessment percentages for town meetings. With resulting lay-offs and reduced services, this annual uncertainty undermines the quality of the educational programs, instructional practices, innovations, and opportunities necessary to ensure that today's students become competent and capable twenty-first century citizens. Within the next few months, the FY2011 operational budget will be finalized. The lasting impact of the final FY2011 budget on students and the school system will depend on adjustments made in response to increases or decreases in federal, state, and local revenue.

What is the value of an education? As the Class of 2010 completes their last trimester at the high school and looks forward to Graduation Day on June 4, the excellent quality of a Whitman-Hanson education is reflected in their solid preparation for the world beyond Whitman-Hanson Regional High School. Although the value of an education cannot be measured solely in dollars and cents, ensuring a high quality education for future graduating classes is an investment in the children of Whitman and Hanson that lasts a lifetime.

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