

More Letters

Some School Budget Numbers to Consider Before You Go to the Polls

To the editor:

It is my belief that our school per-pupil costs are adversely affecting our property values. Neighboring communities have comparable education systems, but with lower costs. Prospective homeowners look at total monthly housing costs, which include property taxes. Given comparable quality school systems, homebuyers will look to buy in a town that utilizes tax dollars more productively. In my opinion, Amherst will not be their first choice destination.

In addition, the growth in our annual school budgets is becoming unsustainable by the taxpayers. In light of declining student enrollments, the SAU and school administrators, along with the school boards have a fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers to run our schools as efficiently as possible. They must look at ways to reduce and equalize the expenses of our schools with the surrounding communities. There are a number of ways to reduce spending including: reductions in personnel, changes in programs and/or reductions in property & equipment.

I suggest we start by using attrition to reduce staff numbers. When someone leaves a position, they should not automatically be replaced. Instead, a thorough analysis should be done including possible reallocation through staffing reassignments.

Early retirement incentives to reduce overall staffing levels and/or create a more balanced workforce of seasoned and new teachers should be considered. A skewed system with a majority of the teachers at the top end of the salary scales is not economically sustainable for our community. Young teachers will not adversely affect the quality of our educational system; instead they can bring new and innovative teaching models and enthusiasm to the districts.

Another personnel proposal could include temporarily freezing salary ranges until we align with competing school districts. Salary surveys should be done with neighboring school districts to justify any salary scale increases and to compare benefit packages. Since many of our staff members are at the top of their pay scales, there is added pressure to move the scales higher to allow for cost of living increases.

We should also be evaluating our programs. We should re-examine minimum class size requirements for offerings in the high school, look at alternative ways to provide programs for extremely small classes and identify and implement techniques to deliver our special education program in a more cost effective and compassionate manner. A Finance Advisory Committee Member raised this last topic at the Souhegan Deliberative Session.

I support Amherst Warrant Article 13 for all day kindergarten, for two reasons. First, to my knowledge the surrounding communities do not offer full day kindergarten as a part of their tax rate. Younger dual working families may take a second look at buying an Amherst home if full day Kindergarten is offered. And, philosophically, I agree with early intervention for all students to meet their maximum potential.

We must also look for ways to reduce property and equipment. For example, we might consider reallocating building in light of the declining enrollments. Clark could be re-purposed or sold

if we shifted grades up one building, moving the 8th grade to the annex at Souhegan.

I invite you to look at some of the hard numbers before you go to the polls:

2014 Amherst Tax Bill breakdown: (per \$1,000 assessed value)

- Town \$5.20
- School \$17.74
- State Educ. \$2.49
- County \$1.23
- Total tax rate \$26.66

This means 75% of our tax dollar is spent on education. (The remaining 25% is divided between the Town of Amherst at 20% and Hillsborough County at 5%.)

If we look at the school budgets, we see that 75% of our costs are salary and benefits with the remaining 25% allocated to all other operational expenses. It is difficult to find substantial savings in the 25% allocated to operational costs as many are fixed and do not vary with enrollment.

However, it is that larger portion that leads to our higher per-pupil costs. Our average cost per pupil in Amherst Pre-K through Grade 8 is \$17,479.97. Our town ranks highest when compared to the surrounding towns for similar grades. We are 14% higher than Hollis/Brookline, and approximately 40% higher than Bedford.

Per Pupil Costs Comparisons (Elementary)

Amherst (PK to 8)	\$17,480
Hollis (PK to 6)	\$15,352
Mont Vernon	\$15,166
Hollis/Brookline Coop (7 to 8)	\$14,928
Brookline (PK to 6)	\$13,878
Bedford (PK to 8)	\$12,505

Average cost per-pupil for Souhegan is \$19,012. Souhegan is 50% higher than Hollis/Brookline Cooperative and 72% higher than Bedford's high school.

Per Pupil Costs Comparisons (High Schools)

Souhegan Cooperative	\$19,012
Hollis/Brookline	\$12,686
Bedford	\$11,028

Since the main driver of our per-pupil cost is salary and benefits, it is relevant to look at and compare average teacher salaries of Amherst versus surrounding districts.

Teacher Average Salary by District

Souhegan Cooperative	\$68,129
Amherst	\$67,353
Brookline	\$58,714
Hollis-Brookline Cooperative	\$58,577
Hollis	\$56,872
Bedford	\$55,829
Mont Vernon	\$54,684

If you rank the State reported average teacher salaries in order from highest to lowest, Souhegan ranks 4th highest and Amherst ranks 8th highest out of the 164 districts included in the State Average.

Teacher Salary Ranges 2014/2015

District	Min - BA Only	Max - MA
+30		
Amherst	39,504	79,248
Hollis	37,493	73,400
Hollis/Brookline	38,992	72,103
Bedford	38,547	71,530
Brookline	37,505	70,402
Mont Vernon	33,488	62,510

According to the NH Department of Education website, our top teacher salary for Amherst School District is \$79,248. No data is published at the site for Souhegan (while the majority of high schools in the state report that data, Souhegan simply states: "Career Ladder"). According to the SAU's business administrator, 60% of our teachers are at the maximum step on their pay range. For the purposes of financial transparency, I believe salary range schedules and distribution of staff on these ranges by quartile should be made available to the Amherst taxpayers for both school districts.

These salary range differences add up significantly. Compare our average high school teacher salary of \$68,129 with Bedford's average of \$55,829, a variance of \$12,300 per teacher. If you multiply that amount by an estimate of 90 teachers at the high school, you calculate an incremental cost due to teacher salary of \$1,107,000. Dividing this number by the student enrollment projection for 2015/2016 of 815 students, the result is \$1,358.

This means that about \$1,350 of our per-pupil cost is related to higher average teachers' salaries. However, the total average per pupil difference with Bedford is almost \$8,000, so from where does the remaining \$6,650 of per-pupil cost come? One explanation could be the benefit package, which includes elements such as: retirement, 403B with match, medical, dental, vision care and the employer portion of payroll taxes. These additional elements contribute to average per-pupil costs. In fact, some of these items correlate directly with base salary. As salaries go higher, these benefits increase in tandem.

Finally, the other part that could contribute to the per-pupil cost difference of \$6,650 is the overall number of teachers and support staff. If we have more teachers and support staff than other school districts for a similar number of pupils, per-pupil cost averages in Amherst will be higher. Consequently, total budget expenses and per-pupil average costs are directly related, not only to salary amounts paid to staff, but also to total staffing levels. The only way to measurably reduce per-pupil costs is through reductions in staff, reductions in salary or a combination of both.

My undergraduate degree in elementary education makes me very supportive of a quality education for our students. I appreciate and thank our teachers for their professionalism. But my graduate degree in accounting and my CPA credential make my financial philosophy driven by a cost versus benefit perspective. I believe it is possible to offer a quality education at a reasonable and competitive cost when compared to similar school districts.

I urge you to think about these numbers before you go to the polls on Election Day. Consider the drivers behind Amherst's school costs and the effect it is having on our home values.

Respectfully submitted,
Margaret McCabe
Amherst

Souhegan School Board Vacancy and Budget

To the editor:

The Souhegan High School deliberative session and recent letters in *The Citizen* provide some very useful information regarding people's opinions. Most seem to think that Souhegan is doing a good job of educating our children. Many are passionate in their views. Parents, students, members of the School Board, and the Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee (SATC) all seem to have the same goal of making the school the best that it can be. No one suggested that the school should be anything other than the best. However, there is disagreement on other issues, cost per pupil, being one. The School Board indicated that they have taken some steps to reduce the cost per student, and it is down \$300+ dollars. That is a good trend if it continues, but it is a very small change. Souhegan's cost is rather high compared to others. The School Board has acknowledged the problem, but suggests that it is an apples and oranges comparison. This is probably true to some extent, as there are many variables that go into the calculation - old school - new school - large school - small school - teacher longevity, etc. This could explain some of the difference, but Souhegan's costs still seem to be considerably higher than most. If the figures are not really that high, it might be beneficial for the School Board to provide tabulated data to explain the comparison. Lacking that, it appears reasonable to question those high costs.

There are many ways to measure a school's student success. Test scores, graduation rates, percentage of graduates going to college, are some. Souhegan does well in some areas, but the New England Common Assessment Program scores are not particularly good. The reasons offered to explain school's performance seem rather weak. Other schools do the same testing and many of them do much better. The school's principal acknowledged the issue, and indicated that improvement was one of his goals. It might be reasonable to pay a premium for an education, if that education is better than can be found in other towns. That is a question some people are asking. It is not enough to have the best school. The goal should be, the best at a reasonable cost. If it is possible to justify higher costs, it is only if the education offered is superior to that found elsewhere.

If statistics were kept on the passionate commitment of a community to it's high school, then Souhegan would be at the top of the list. That is a good thing. However, it also has a down side. It is not unusual for those questioning the operation of this school to be criticized, sometimes rather harshly. That is unfortunate because we need different points of view to constantly evaluate and improve our educational system. The March election ballot will include an opening on the Souhegan School Board and the two candidates have differing views.

The AAUW sponsored a Candidates Night recently and the entire program is well worth watching. The two candidates start at 01:47:43, so you can skip ahead to that point. The link is <http://amherstnh.pegcentral.com/player.php?video=cd54a46feaa9e8f722afa039678ffed>

Both candidates are current SAFC members and offer an interesting comparison of their approach towards school board duties and their goals. It provides a very good forum to make an informed choice. One candidate wrote in a letter to the editor of *The Citizen* on Feb.10th, that a fellow SAFC member was disgruntled and had an agenda. Disgruntled is often used to describe someone who has a different point of view. If helping Souhegan High School become a very good school at a reasonable cost is an agenda, then it is a good one. One line of the Souhegan High School Mission Statement is "To challenge and expand the comfortable limits of thought, tolerance, and performance." It is an admirable goal for all citizens to pursue. Unfortunately, what the letter writer referred to seems to have forgotten that dictum.

Peter Eiche
Amherst

Dwayne Purvis Will Serve The Voters Well

To the editor:

We are writing to encourage the voters in Amherst to place their support behind candidate Dwayne Purvis in the upcoming Souhegan School Board election.

With multiple children spanning many grade levels in the Amherst and Souhegan districts Dwayne has a vested interest in maximizing the school's potential. Indeed, as a citizen he has been attending meetings for years, listening carefully and offering insightful comments that helped to productively shape discussion.

As a member of the Souhegan budget advisory committee, Dwayne worked collaboratively with the board and the other members of the committee while at the same time asking challenging questions aimed at structuring a responsible budget that sought excellence in education and breadth of opportunity for its students.

Dwayne will serve the voters well by facilitating a cost-effective focus in the school board budgetary process. He will ask probing questions while simultaneously exercising his innate ability to acutely listen to those around him.

Dwayne Purvis represents the best of how concerned citizens and parents can contribute to the growth of our community.

Fran and Jeff Harrow
Amherst

More Letters on pages 7, 13 and 15

Chen Is A Proven Leader

To the editor:

Our family has had the pleasure of being friends and neighbors with David Chen for the past 18 years. During that time he has demonstrated his commitment to doing whatever it takes to help our children best prepare for life beyond high school. Whether it was helping his own two boys move on to successful careers, or mentoring and coaching other students - he is committed to their success. David has deep roots in our community at both the school and the town level having served on the Souhegan curriculum committee, Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee, Town of Amherst Zoning board and various football and lacrosse organizations.

David has proven credentials as a father, husband, friend, coach, mentor, business owner and community steward. Please vote on March 10th.

Thank you,
Robin Hefflefinger
Amherst

We Urge You To Support Dave Chen's Candidacy

To the editor:

We are writing to endorse David Chen's candidacy for the Souhegan School Board. We have known David since we moved to town in 1980. Our children are the same ages and attended Amherst Schools and SHS together.

We know David has been a strong supporter of Souhegan since its inception. He continues to be committed to delivering high quality education at Souhegan High School. As a recent retiree, he has the time to devote to the job and has experience as a business executive and as a town and school volunteer to bring to the table. We urge you to We are writing to endorse David Chen's candidacy for the Souhegan School Board. We urge you to support his candidacy.

Nancy and Vick Bemison
Amherst

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