

Letter submitted to the Daily Times Chronicle, 3/23/04

Clarity on Staff Reductions

Confused about school staffing if the override fails? Last week's Winchester Star article "Confusion Reigns Over School Positions Lost Without Override," made it obvious that clarification is needed. In this column we describe staff reductions expected if the override fails. With a better understanding of these facts, informed votes can be cast on March 30th.

First, how many positions would be eliminated if the override fails? The simple answer is 20.87 fulltime equivalent positions (FTEs). That's 20.87 fewer positions than the schools will require to deliver the current program to next year's greater number of enrolled students.

With expected enrollment increases next year, the Superintendent requested 6.8 additional FTEs for FY05. If the override passes, the needed positions would be filled; class sizes and programs would remain stable.

If the override fails, a combination of new and existing positions would be eliminated, requiring the schools to operate with 20.87 fewer FTEs than needed: 9.27 FTEs eliminated from the elementary schools, 4.6 from the middle school, and 7.0 from the high school (details available at <http://www.winchester.k12.ma.us/SC/documents.html>). Core teachers and non-core programs would be eliminated; students would be shifted – into larger classes and/or study halls. These cuts would be permanent and would be followed by additional staff cuts in the second and third years of what would have been a three-year override.

What's an FTE? For purposes of preparing and comparing budgets, we count fulltime equivalent staff positions, not people. This is important since we employ full- and part-time staff. One full time English teacher equals one FTE, as do two half-time music teachers. These three people fill two FTE positions.

The confusion that arose during the March 11th Finance Committee meeting was primarily due to confusion over FTEs versus people. The Finance Committee asked how many people – not FTEs – would be affected. The number of people is also important: from a financial perspective, the Town must budget for layoff costs; from an employer's and educator's perspective the administration must know which teachers would receive pink slips and must plan to redistribute their students.

But determining exactly how many people would be laid off is complicated - not because anybody intends to overcomplicate, but because personnel matters are, by nature, complex. Rules of seniority must be applied in cases where whole programs aren't cut; it might be necessary to lay off three part-time teachers to

equal one FTE position; or one full-time person might need to be laid off at the high school and one hired at the elementary school because the high school teacher is not certified to teach elementary students.

So how many people might be laid off? Here is the breakdown as we currently understand it (brace yourselves - it's not easy to explain or follow):

Override or not, class sizes at Lincoln and Muraco will require 2 new elementary teachers to be hired.

Of the 6.8 budgeted new positions, the remaining 4.8 would be reduced, requiring no layoffs. Each new position eliminated, though, would leave students who would need to be accommodated in other classrooms.

Since 3 of the reduced existing positions (2 at the middle school and one at the elementary level) involve retiring employees for positions that are to be eliminated, these reductions would also require no layoffs. Each position eliminated via retirement would leave students who would need to be accommodated in other classrooms.

That leaves 13.07 FTE positions to be eliminated by delivering pink slips to an as-yet unknown number of teachers. The total number would certainly be more than 13.07, since many of these positions are staffed with part-time employees. The specific number depends on the programs to be eliminated and on contractual rules for reducing staff. This won't be known with full certainty until the June statutory layoff deadline (our Director of Finance is preparing an estimate). And each position eliminated via layoff would leave students who would need to be accommodated in other classrooms.

In summary, elimination of 4.8 new FTEs plus 3 retirements plus 13.07 layoffs totals a 20.87 FTE reduction.

Assuming that the School Committee makes no substantive changes to the Administration's recommendation, a failed override would result in the following FTE reductions from the FY05 school budget request and the corresponding impacts on individual teachers:

Elementary Schools: classroom teaching position eliminated (1.00 FTE , none laid off, due to retirement); Kindergarten aide position eliminated (0.72 FTE , 1 person laid off); all librarian positions eliminated (4.20 FTEs , 5 people laid off, no layoffs for 0.2 new position, not hired); all instrumental music teaching positions eliminated (1.80 FTE, layoffs/reductions affecting 2-4 teachers); all kindergarten art teaching positions eliminated (0.35 FTE, layoffs/reductions affecting 1-5 teachers); PE teaching positions (1.20 FTEs, layoffs/reductions affecting 2-5).

Middle School: core teaching positions eliminated (2 .00 FTEs reduced via retirement, none laid off); exploratory positions eliminated (2.00 FTEs reduced,

layoffs/reductions affecting 2-5); Health position not restored, (0.60 FTE reduced, no layoffs)

High School: core teaching positions eliminated (7.00 FTEs reduced, layoffs/reductions affecting 3-15, no layoffs for 4 new positions not hired)

Total layoffs and reductions would affect 16-40 people.

Were the School Committee to make changes to these proposed reductions (based on, e.g., different educational priorities), these changes would be offset by an equivalent dollar value of FTE reductions; a slightly different set of positions would be reduced, with reductions of different positions and layoffs of different teachers, but with similar impacts on the students.

Regardless of the exact distribution of reductions, one thing is clear: a failed override would result in the permanent elimination of these positions, the layoff of the valued professionals that fill them, and reductions to the quality of our students' education, experienced as larger class sizes, fewer exploratory opportunities, and more study halls. Cuts in the second and third years that would have been covered by the three-year override would instead be made to remaining teaching positions, the majority of which are core classroom positions.

We hope these facts have helped inform your decision on a ballot question that is of critical importance to Winchester.

Please vote Yes on March 30th.

Winchester School Committee
Sarah Swiger, Chairman
Kathy Bodie, Vice-Chairman
Mark Feblowitz
Peter Haley
Sam Kounaves