

**On the Question of the Override  
Submitted to the Daily Time Chronicle - March 1, 2004**

On March 30th, voters will choose whether to maintain the quality of Winchester's schools. The override ballot question, which establishes a three-year plan to fund school and municipal budgets, is not merely a question of whether taxes should be increased; it is a question of whether \$1,600,000 should be eliminated from the fiscal year 2005 school budget.

A decision of this significance requires factual information and careful consideration. Whatever you decide, your vote will have a significant impact on our schools and on our students. We urge you to take the time to make an informed decision.

This column examines the FY2005 school budget and the changes likely to occur, with and without passage of an override.

A variety of circumstances - the economy, state aid cuts, enrollment increases, and double-digit growth in health insurance costs, etc. - have led communities throughout Massachusetts to face historically high deficits. This year, Winchester schools face a projected \$1,600,000 deficit. Closing a gap of this magnitude without an override can only occur via considerable cuts to personnel and programs, cuts to a system that is by many measures lean and efficient.

Last summer, the Board of Selectmen convened a Budget Task Force, which studied and "scrubbed" projected revenues and expenses for the next three fiscal years. Winchester's Town Manager characterized the projected FY05 budget deficit as being roughly the same amount as has been reduced from Winchester's usual state aid appropriation. Task force members determined that, given projected revenues and expenses, only an override could provide revenues sufficient to close the projected deficit for FY2005 and to address deficits projected through 2007.

Given these bleak projections, the Superintendent and School Committee developed an FY05 School Budget that maintains current service levels, being mindful of anticipated revenue shortfalls. It was prepared with the following goals in mind: maintain class sizes, restore unsustainable reductions taken in 2004, and replace obsolete elementary school computers. No new or expanded programs, materials or supplies were funded in this budget.

To maintain class sizes with a projected enrollment increase of 70 students, one teacher will be needed at each of the Lincoln and Muraco elementary schools. At the high school, to cover an unaddressed increase of 98 students since 2002, four additional teachers will be needed. At McCall, a 0.6 full time equivalent position is needed to restore physical education classes reduced in FY04 to retain the health program, and \$32,000 was restored to the materials & supplies budgets, cut by \$80,000 in FY04. \$100,000 was budgeted to replace 108 obsolete computers (vintage 1995, pre-web Macs) in elementary schools not slated for renovation.

During the budget process, the School Committee and Selectmen agreed to an override plan that will require \$275,000 to be cut from the proposed school budget, even if the override were to pass; the requisite cuts would be felt, but the schools would get by.

If the override fails, the anticipated \$1,600,000 deficit will require significant reductions system-wide, with adverse affects on nearly every student.

To meet the Town Manager's budget without override revenues, the following reductions have been proposed:

- Elementary schools: \$400,000
- Middle school: \$300,000
- High school: \$400,000
- Central office: \$100,000
- Educational technology: \$150,000
- Special Education: \$250,000

Total staff reductions would be 20.87 full time equivalent staff as follows:

- Elementary schools: 9.27
- Middle school: 4.6
- High school: 7.0

Details are as follows:

Elementary Schools: eliminate one teacher and one aide, all Elementary Library Resource Managers, Elementary Instrumental Music, and Kindergarten Art; reduce PE, supplies.

Middle School: eliminate 2 core teachers, 2 exploratory teachers, the extra-curricular program, Team Leader stipends; reduce equipment, other expenses.

High School: eliminate 7 teachers (4 were added to meet enrollment growth); decrease athletic budget, supplies, materials.

Special Education: reduce transportation, professional development, legal professional services, tuition, testing, funding of independent evaluations, student support, contracted services.

Educational Technology: eliminate computer replacements, professional services, professional development, repairs, software, supplies.

Central Office: eliminate the business department leader; reduce curriculum and in-service workshops, textbooks, professional development.

These recommendations must still be approved by the School Committee, and may be adjusted to reflect community priorities and revised revenue projections. While the specifics may change, one thing is certain: absent passage of an override, the schools will close the deficit by eliminating essentials. Almost every possible cut will do harm to the quality of our schools.

For those who say "there must be money somewhere," consider the composition of the FY05 school budget:

- 86% Personal Services (payroll)
- 8% SPED tuition and transportation
- 4% Other Expenses
- 2% Educational Materials and Supplies

Personal Services costs, by far the largest, are the result of negotiation and can only be reduced via staff reduction. Most SPED tuition and transportation funds are committed; further reductions would result in reduced services and significant exposure, were our students to require additional services or out-of-district placement. Most "Other Expenses," e.g., Professional Development, are required by statute or committed by contract. If all Educational Supplies and Materials were eliminated, a deficit greater than \$1,000,000 would remain.

Having participated in the Budget Task Force, we are convinced that the municipal budgets could not and should not yield funds to cover the schools' projected deficit. The override vote is as much a vote for maintaining municipal services as it is a vote for maintaining the quality of our schools.

How we got here is another discussion for another column. The simplified version is that Massachusetts' tax policy is not structured to cover reasonable growth in municipal budgets. Municipalities have relied on state aid to bridge property tax shortfalls, but neither the economy nor prevailing state appropriations preferences are adequate to cover Massachusetts towns' budgets, leaving the towns with no alternative but to cut services or propose overrides. Wisely, Winchester is doing both.

The School Committee urges you to vote for giving our students three more years of quality education.

If you need more information to clarify this complex issue, please contact a School Committee member, the Superintendent or a member of the Board of Selectmen.

Please vote yes on the override ballot question on March 30.

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