

It's not just about the principals

By William Kelly

I was extremely disappointed in the outcome of the vote on the Jamestown School budget. Especially that the questions asked by certain Town Council members were characterized as argumentative and "attacking the School Committee." It is not only the right of the council to ask questions, but it is their responsibility and if those questions are such that they go to the core of the matter that is exactly what they should do.

At the last council meeting, I tried to separate the school budget from the town budget with the purpose of voting "no" on the school's portion of the overall budget.

Councilman Robert Sutton seconded my motion and the other three members of the council voted against separating the two. I, then, would have voted in favor of the town's budget prepared by our Town Administrator Bruce Keiser, because I believe that he has done a good job and has kept costs reasonable.

However, I do not believe that the School Committee has worked its budget over with as sharp a pencil. The idea of having two school principals that will cost us close to a quarter of a million dollars, with benefits, to supervise a projected school enrollment of 477 students is out of keeping with what exists through out the state. It is worth noting that Little Compton, a similar community pays its principal \$85,000 a year to supervise 317 students.

When asked by the council for a justification of the proposed administrative structure, the School Committee gave answers that were either condescending or filled with educational jargon such as

"site specific" problems at the two schools as an explanation for why we need two principals. The facts presented by the School Committee are that we have two schools, Melrose with 279 students and Lawn with 198 children. Administering these two schools that are separate, one from the other by approximately 300 yards, could easily be administered by one principal being in one school in the morning and the second school in the afternoon. If this were an insurmountable scheduling problem, it would be a lot cheaper to buy a golf cart for the principal—to travel back and forth between the two schools—then to pay for a second principal.

The per-pupil costs at the Jamestown schools are among the highest in the state. The reasons for the high cost of educating children on the island are several. One is the small school size of the district that does not permit economies of scale to manage and administer the school program. A second significant factor is the small size of classes throughout most of the K-8 grades. Class size is a policy choice by the School Committee to provide a quality education but, in these tight economic times, these choices must be in line with general educational practices in the state to avoid excessive burden on our taxpayers.

How do we address these issues? First, we need to look at ways to share administrative services with other districts by re-

gionalizing with one of our neighboring communities. Secondly, a comparison with other school districts' class size should also be performed to see where Jamestown schools stand in relation to other elementary and middle school programs.

The proposed two principal question is just one part of the budget issue. Other significant issues as noted above are class size, staffing and building utilization.

The response to the need for such small class size is that a significant number of special needs children are in these classes. What has happened is that we have created a special education program that has turned the Jamestown schools into magnet schools for special needs children. I have repeatedly heard parents say that their children are in need of special education programs and that is why they have moved to Jamestown. Faced with a similar problem, I would do exactly the same thing. I am not suggesting that we have less than the best special educational program in the state, but at what cost is this program to the taxpayers of Jamestown?

Another very disturbing factor in this budget process is there was a great deal of discussion about special education but little if any mention of specially designed programs for gifted children. This is a complaint I have heard from a number of parents and a reason why some parents have opted to send their children to other

schools.

The question was raised about the feasibility of closing the Lawn Avenue School and sending the students off island. The response by the Superintendent was that they had taken a survey and approximately 80 percent of the individuals that responded were opposed to the idea. However, at best this was a flawed survey because it was limited to the parents in the schools and not the rest of the taxpayers in Jamestown. This idea is worth a reasonable debate and should not be blown off.

Closing the Lawn Avenue School to have the students attend a middle school off island would; one, afford the students a broader curriculum, two, more opportunity to compete in after school athletic programs, three, a broader extra-curricular program and four, a much more diverse school population.

These issues are far reaching and have a significant impact on the entire community. I am well aware of the need for an excellent education program in Jamestown or any community for that matter. Good schools affect property values, which are important to us all. To resolve these issues I would recommend that the School Committee partner with the town and commission an organizational study of the entire school operation, including programming, staffing, class size, administrative structure, building utilization, off-island educational opportunities and regionalization. This report could be undertaken and submitted prior to the next round of budgets and done with an open mind to the suggestions/recommendations made by those commissioned to do the study.

The writer is a member of the Town Council.

• VIEWPOINT •

"I have repeatedly heard parents say that their children are in need of special education programs and that is why they have moved to Jamestown."

— William Kelly

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NKHS Improv workshop tonight at Teen Center

The North Kingstown High School Improv Troupe will host a night of improvisation tonight, May 15, at 6:30 p.m. at the Jamestown Teen Center.

The event is open to the public and will help benefit students with autism. Students with autism and their families are encouraged to participate and enjoy a fun night of improvisational skits and acting. This activity is based on a student's Senior Project that explored the effects of using improvisational acting to help students with autism. Admission is free and refreshments will be served.

Kettlebottom goes pheasant hunting

This Saturday's program, on May 18, at noon on NESN, will feature John Longo on a pheasant hunt in Connecticut, during which his dog, Hatcher, gets quite a workout.

Longo visits his friend, Vincent, to learn about beekeeping and to see how honey is produced.

With some pheasants and honey, John heads to Carbone's restaurant, where the head chef prepares pheasant with honey glaze.

Plant sale Saturday at East Ferry

The Quononocott Garden Club's annual spring plant sale is this Saturday, May 17, at East Ferry from 9 a.m. to noon. The rain date is Sunday, May 18.

Healthy native plants, including unusual perennials, vibrant geraniums, specialty annuals and some hanging baskets as well as small trees and shrubs will be available.

Proceeds from the sale fund many civic beautification projects.

GET USED TO THE FACTS OF LIFE

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In our world economy, there are five principal commodities: grain, meat, oil, coal, and steel. Of these, Chinese consumption now outpaces the U.S. in all but oil.
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If Chinese and Indian per capita energy consumption were to rise to the level of the U.S., oil consumption from these two countries alone would double today's global oil consumption.
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Global population has increased from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 6.6 billion today. That is, it more than doubled in less than sixty years.
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During the same period, however, human demands upon the earth's resources increased more than 400%.
...

The prudent among us will keep these facts of life in mind. If our leaders fail to, we shall all suffer the consequences.

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MORNEAU & MURPHY ATTORNEYS

77 Narragansett Avenue
Jamestown, RI 02835
(401) 423-0400

E-mail: jamurphy@jamestownlawyer.com