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2003 State of the Schools

State of the Schools Report

Cites accomplishments under superintendent

Presented by School Committee Chair Suzanne Owayda, April 28, 2003

Good evening –

Welcome to our first State of the Schools Report to the residents of Arlington. First I would like to introduce our two newest members of the Arlington School Committee – Jeff Thielman and Sue Sheffler. It is my pleasure as the chair of the Arlington School Committee to share with you where we have been, where we are today and what the future could bring for the Arlington Public Schools.

Before I speak about the specifics of the Arlington Public Schools, I would like to reflect generally about public schools in America. When one stops to think about the roles and responsibilities of our public schools, it is quite an awesome concept. Public schools receive all types of students: No child is turned away – public schools educate the gifted, the not-so-gifted, the athlete, the scholars, the musicians, students with lifelong medical needs, children with physical and emotional challenges. Public schools educate children who come from homes with shelves lined with books and from homes where there is not a book to be found, some children come prepared with a good nights' sleep ready to learn, some children come to school thankful that school is a much safer place than their own home. Our children are taught by caring and intelligent teachers, whose job it is to motivate and reach all children no matter what their potential.

All this in a society which chooses to barely pay teachers enough to live in the communities in which they teach, but chooses to pay three or four sports stars enough to fund many public-school systems for a whole year. I think we can all agree that the American public schools face a huge challenge, and it is met with varying degrees of success.

The town of Arlington is a microcosm of our larger world – we must follow Mass. Department of Education regulations and federal regulations, now known as no child left behind. The goal of the Arlington School Committee and the Arlington Public Schools is to focus as much of our resources as possible on the student-teacher relationship. This is getting more difficult since the state and federal requirements appear to be driven by paperwork and documentation, which takes much time, energy and manpower.

Nevertheless, the current state of the Arlington Public Schools is good. In fact, I would characterize it as very good, but the future of our schools is uncertain.

[After] Superintendent Donovan first arrived in Arlington [in July 1994], about 200 interested community members, and parents wrote a five-year strategic plan that set a course for Arlington. To those new to the school system, this may not seem like much, but it had never been done before, and this comprehensive plan allowed Arlington to successfully win two debt-exclusion referendum votes. More importantly, it helped bring parents into the process of designing schools and what happens in them. It began a real team effort with all town officials and brought credibility in the acceptance of our annual operating budgets.

As the five years ended, we moved to a district-goals process, which set a plan in place for continual renewal of schools. Our present goals are lofty, especially in the light of our fiscal reality, but they are: to recruit, support and retain highly qualified teachers and teaching in all schools. The goals require us to publish a sequential k-12 curriculum, which aligns with state frameworks and encompasses a comprehensive, instructional and assessment design. The two final district goals speak to strengthening programs and opportunities for the diverse learner and study the restructuring of the school day for maximum student learning.

Under Superintendent Donovan's watch, we embarked on an aggressive rebuild campaign to replace old, dismal buildings with new, colorful and great places to learn. In under 10 years, we took advantage of state funding programs and replaced five of our nine buildings. This energized and brought confidence to a school system, which had become stagnant. The commitment this town made to its structures has permeated to improve what was happening inside the buildings as well. In the past 10 years this school system has worked hard to reduce class size, to add technology instruction to both students and teachers where there was none, to provide more prof development to staff, to capture more grant money (much of it competitive grants), to apply innovative teaching techniques such as TERC math and Guided Reading to improve student learning and achievement, added higher level math and science classes, increased electives at Arlington High School.

In addition, we welcomed the Gay/Straight Alliance, which embraces differences, so that our students and staff can work and study in a welcoming and safe atmosphere. Arlington has gone from a town with an average school system to an above-average school system. It is true that as the community changed, it pushed for improvements, but it took a leader to listen and provide the avenues for change and improvement. I would like to acknowledge the leadership, energy and devotion to this community that our super of schools has demonstrated in the nine years she has been here. I would also like to state very clearly that I – along with a strong majority of the School Committee -- have the utmost confidence in our superintendent, Kathleen Donovan.

Each morning we welcome 4,537 students to our nine schools. Teachers are prepared with challenging strategies that reflect best practices in each area of the comprehensive curricula that has been designed and aligned with the state frameworks. Students are assessed by varied creative measures, including rubrics, portfolios, and standardized tests in addition to the statewide MCAS exam. Under each and every measure our students do well. It does not matter if they are academically advanced or challenged, it does not matter if they are athletically skilled or not, it does not matter if they are proficient in the performing or visual arts, it does not matter if they wish to become chefs at Johnson & Wales or diplomats at Princeton. Each and every one of these students belongs to us – there is room for all of them in our schools. This School Committee and the taxpayers of the town of Arlington have consistently demanded this level of excellence and choice for its children. The Arlington Public Schools have answered this

demand in a truly caring, competent and professional manner.

We boast of nationally certified teachers, and celebrate the performing arts of our students and staff. Our athletics programs, from hockey to wrestling to tennis, produce some of the finest teams in the Greater Boston League. The number of volunteers who work within our schools is dramatic by any standard. The collaboration and professional pride exhibited daily in our schools allow us to proudly report that "we are Arlington, we live and learn in a diverse community that respects the uniqueness of our individuality, and respects the individual who is unique. We send our students into the world prepared to meet many challenges. We are safe in our schools, we support one another.

Our mentoring program has been hailed and copied by many other school systems across our commonwealth. This past summer teachers from the Stratton and Dallin schools attended a workshop for the Bay State Grant; our teachers were used as models for how literacy should be taught in our elementary schools. The highly talented and committed staff set these high expectations for themselves as well as for their students.

You may have read about some of our recent accomplishments in The Arlington Advocate and Boston Globe. I will review them briefly: The Mass. Music Educators' All-State Conference chose seven orchestras from the state to compete, and two of the seven came from Arlington (the Ottoson Select Ensemble and the Ottoson String Orchestra). The Spy Ponders made the Super 8 hockey tournament. Senior citizens and high schoolers work together on computer skills. Three of our students – Daniel Forman, Julia Manoli and Elizabeth Scannell – were finalist in the National Merit Scholarship program. Recently, Lucille Burt, an English teacher at AHS, and Sheldon Obelsky, a social-studies teacher at AHS, were selected to receive the Golden Foundation for Excellence in Education Award. Don Bockler, a science teacher at AHS, was selected by the Mass. Association of Science Teachers to be inducted into the Science Educators Hall of Fame. Our elementary art teacher, Wendy Campbell received the Secretary's Award For Excellence in Environmental Education at the State House for her work on the Arlington Reservoir Art Project.

Arlington wants a first-class school system, and we aim to deliver it.

At the elementary level we are organized around seven neighborhood schools, which educators will tell you is the ideal method of organizing for young children. This year we have a senior graduating class of 270 students but a kindergarten enrollment of 431. Arlington has supported a full-day kindergarten to give a gift of time to students so they are not so rushed as they enter the world of school. We naturally need to boast at having the No. 1 school in MCAS for three consecutive years. This year we have three schools in the top 20 out of 351 districts in the commonwealth. Even though MCAS is not the only measure of success, we are right up there with school systems, such as Lexington, Wellesley, Weston and Concord when it comes to MCAS results, but if you compare our per pupil spending, Arlington spends \$6,819 for our regular-education student compared to \$7,960, \$7,983, \$9,803 and \$7,912, respectively, in those other communities. I would say we are getting a lot for our dollar.

To watch our young students perform plays and communicate in another language is pure delight as we prepare them for the ever-changing world they are inheriting. Our kindergartens are in the process of being accredited. In every elementary grade, we have been able to provide weekly specialists in reading, Spanish, physical education, health, art, music and library/media. It is not unusual to visit an elementary classroom and hear discussions on brain research, planting seeds, map and geography skills, as well as many different strategies to solve a mathematical problem or increase literacy skills.

As children advance to the middle school and become young adults, they are organized in small clusters to mimic the neighborhood schools. This allows them to socially adjust to being in a wider group, while still feeling the warmth of small working classes. In addition to the standard academic classes, we offer an adviser/advisee program, technology classes, and before and after school self supporting activities. Guidance counselors are available to help the students deal with the many challenges of growing up.

As the students advance to AHS, they are met with an extremely professional staff who chose to be teachers for the sole reason of working with students. As the accreditation report pointed out; the high school evidences quality education, a desire to be global citizens, and a high level of participation by the students in all school activities; academic, social, artistic, and athletic. This participation rate is among the highest in the commonwealth and speaks volumes about our student and staff. Students graduating from AHS with 98% MCAS rate are consistently accepted at the colleges of their choice. The 1.2% drop-out rate is extremely low. Approximately 140 students attend Minuteman Regional to follow through on career plans that are vocational in nature. A wide variety of electives have been available to students based on their interest. Just this past year, the requirements for graduation have been increased and include community-service activities and internships to fulfill graduation requirements.

I would be remiss if I did not mention some of the growing pains (some would say aches) we have been experiencing at AHS – I will read a quote from the accreditation report – “the school board clearly has a strong commitment to student learning throughout the district. With the existing budget limitations and the recent concentration on elementary/middle school construction and education, the board has been forced to restrict spending that would benefit the high school for the long term. It is necessary for the school board to give immediate attention to the needs of AHS.” We take these comments seriously, and will work during this time of forced restructuring to examine how best to improve ahs in this time of change.

Approximately 18% of our students receive special-education services from highly qualified personnel. Special-needs children are a part of our community; we have a moral obligation to provide the best education possible. We are required to provide services to preschoolers (3 years) to young adults (22 years of age). Based upon the challenges faced by our students, individualized education plans are designed to allow all children to fully access the education provided in our schools. Approximately 90 students are educated outside of arlington in either a collaborative setting, a private day placement or a residential home. We will continue to strive for ways to provide the needed services more efficiently.

In this era of education reform, heavy with mandates which leaves less room for local control, we still believe it to be our highest responsibility to provide a challenging, comprehensive, and sound education for all of our students. Even when the future of our schools is uncertain we have room to improve and will continue to improve our curriculum and our instruction. We will continue to look for ways to be more efficient without compromising the services we deliver. Every effort will be made to communicate with parents and the community. We will always maintain our commitment to serve the best interest of all students in a balanced, inclusive and comprehensive k-2 educational program.

The rebuild campaigns established education as the No. 1 priority for this town. I believe that our commitment to education is once again being severely tested. The superintendent working with the School Committee presented the Finance Committee a fiscal 2004 level-service budget with \$2.1 million of reductions. This is the budget we would get with an override; further

reductions would completely eliminate much of the progress I just spoke about.

A proposition 2½ override is essential now to avoid loss of staff and knowledge that could take years to replace.

As one of three co-chairs of the Together For Arlington campaign, I respectfully request that you join me in re-establishing our commitment to education in this town. Let's preserve the progress arlington has made over the years, please join me in not only supporting our together for arlington over ride campaign but actively working for Arlington and the greater good. Thank you.