

Control Public School Spending

By Lewis M. Andrews
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Classroom aid Karen Wilson plays with students in a pre-k classroom at Groton's Claude Chester School on Feb. 6, 2009. The Groton public school system's pre-kindergarten program was re-accredited last winter by the National Association for the Education of Young Children under new, more stringent standards than the program's previous recognition.

For more than a year former Branford school Superintendent Armand A. Fusco has been working with taxpayer groups and town officials in Enfield, Redding, Trumbull, Wolcott, and elsewhere in Connecticut to bring public education costs under control. His efforts have been praised by Susan Kniep, president of the Federation of Connecticut Taxpayers Organizations.

Schools account for the largest portion of local spending; and since so many municipalities are facing layoffs, service cutbacks, and deeper debt, I asked Dr. Fusco what practices would substantially reduce spending without hurting the curriculum.

Here is what he recommends:

1. The single most important policy is "not to fill any vacancy for up to 90 days except temporarily." This allows time for a comprehensive analysis to determine if the position can be eliminated, consolidated, or provided at less cost.
2. When it comes to drawing up proposed school budgets, more superintendents need to "incorporate the amounts actually spent the previous year," so boards and taxpayers can better understand what is really needed.

Along this line, new school board members should participate in some form of budget training. According to Fusco, a 2004 grand jury report that investigated all 70 school districts in Suffolk

County, Long Island, for fraud and waste concluded that “many of the district administrators ... have been lax in taking adequate steps to prevent theft, fraud and other malfeasance (S)trong internal controls in business offices had come to be viewed as optional luxuries.”

3. Every school board needs to pay better attention to the student activity account. Hundreds of thousands in cash flow through these funds, usually without rigorous oversight.

4. When schools require consultants with expertise not available on staff, the boards should look for residents with the requisite skills who are willing to donate their time. “Retirees are an especially rich source of talent,” says Dr. Fusco.

5. Outsourcing can save a lot of money, but requires creative thinking to conform to union and/or legal constraints. Many positions can be contracted out to retirees who are looking for extra income, have benefits, and will work for half salaries or even less because they are already collecting a pension.

Union obstacles may be avoided by having the school eliminate a department and then contract with the town for services. Fusco says this strategy has been used around the country to lower costs for waste removal, food service, custodians, transportation, and some special education staffing.

6. Citizen watchdogs - a source of helpful suggestions - need access to a variety of public documents that take time and money to duplicate. The school's check register, payroll roster, budget, and even teacher schedule, should be posted online.

7. Typically, school programs are either added or expanded with little effort made to eliminate outdated services, but all services should be reevaluated every three to five years.

For 20 years, Somers, Connecticut assumed it was paying a fair price of \$3.49 a gallon for 8,000 gallons of propane a year. But when the town allowed competitive bidding, it received a low bid of \$1.49 a gallon. Only then did the Somers' regular supplier drop its price, first to \$2.49 and then finally to \$1.29 a gallon.

8. Purchasing is done all year long and represents a large expenditure. There should be a purchasing manual detailing the procedures and practices.

9. Prohibit administrator credit cards. They are not needed and the misuse of credit cards is a very common problem.

Also, require the verification of unknown vendors and put limits on employee reimbursements. Fusco believes the most abused area of school spending involves reimbursements.

10. Finally, when a vacancy occurs for a new superintendent, the school board should have candidates read the above policies and ask them to comment on what they disagree with and why.

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