

To the Editor

As school districts gear up to deal with the economic crisis they have created, I want to remind people of the consequences of not facing the realities of fiscal irresponsibility. When a school district's administration follows the advice of others who know how to resort to gimmickry to get another budget passed, there will always be unintended consequences. Those consequences can be as simple and mundane as students not receiving the quality of education they deserve or they can be as complex and devastating as the death of a beautiful human being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

These public school budget issues are not new. They continue to haunt us because the underlying causes have never been dealt with honestly. There has always been an eight hundred pound gorilla in the budget negotiating room who glares at anyone who dares to make eye contact with him.

Public school budgets are primarily comprised of teachers' salaries and benefits. These union negotiated salary contracts include automatic "step" increases. These salary increases are outside the reach of school boards or groups of concerned residents who are sometimes given labels like "Budget Review Advisory Committee". The reason these groups are formed is not because they are effective in bringing budgets in line with tax revenue but rather to engage concerned citizens in the process of passing the largest possible budget. People who participate in the budget process are known to vote for the budget they believe they had a hand in creating. It is all a ruse and the non-administrative participants are unwitting actors in a dog and pony show.

Districts that make an early public display of this budget process will be under the watchful eye of neighboring districts that will employ their successful tactics. Such was the case in 1997 when the Superintendent of the Wynantskill Union Free School District employed an under-the-radar budgeting tactic she hoped the school board wouldn't notice. Superintendents have a union of their own and they collaborate with one another to manage their districts. The tactic Superintendent Colleen Fennell employed was to hide a fictitious item in the budget that was discovered by the Board of Education. The B.O.E. President had been duly elected to reign in spending and took his job seriously. The Superintendent lost her job and subsequently, tragically, resorted to a bottle of alcohol and a garage full of carbon monoxide for relief.

I believe that her life should be honored by the lesson we should learn from her tragedy. Will that lesson be for administrators to become more hardened and stealthy in their management practices or will they finally look the eight hundred pound gorilla in the eye?

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