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Letter: 'It should not be necessary'

Thursday, June 8, 2006

To the editor,

Last week's article "Planning for a Playground" brought to mind the Nov. 8, 2004, Town Meeting appropriation of \$100,000 to fund the Wood End playground. Yes, that's right, according to Supt. Schettini, the \$100,000 (\$100K) transferred into the Wood End project was to fund the new Wood End playground. Where did that money go? That \$100K was part of the \$650,000 surplus from the Special Education Circuit Breaker reimbursement that was transferred into the school building projects at that time and was designated specifically for a new playground at the Wood End school! Why are parents collecting an additional \$100K now when the school department already received the \$100K from that November Town Meeting for that very purpose?

Over the past two years, surplus Special Ed Circuit Breaker funds (\$650K and \$850K respectively) have been transferred into the three school building projects, rather than remaining within the SPED operation budget to offset future year's needs. Town Meeting warrants and presentations for both Town Meetings clearly reveal the Circuit Breaker revenue as the source of the "surplus." (Documentation confirming this can be found on the Web site www.iror.org news section of May 2006).

To justify the playground fundraising effort, the spokesperson quoted in the Advocate article states, "By the time the school was built there was little money left over for a play structure." Five months before the Wood End project was completed, the school committee asked Town Meeting in May 2004 to transfer \$634,000 from the incomplete Wood End project funds into the Barrows construction project. In reality, there was more than enough money in the Wood End project budget to fund the \$100K playground. The school committee and school administrators count on the "forgetfulness" of Town Meeting, and the ignorance of well meaning parents.

Unfortunately, too few Town Meeting members have the courage to demand better public accountability for how the School Committee spends our money. Parents need not raise money for a playground when public money was already been appropriated for it twice, (once within the project's scope and budget, and second time with the additional \$100K appropriation)... and it should not be necessary to then raise funds again, this time privately, before that Wood End playground becomes a reality. It's all coming from the same pockets, folks, and we don't know where the money has been going!

The school committee must be held accountable for all expenditures and building project oversight. Town Meeting and the Finance Committee must be more than rubber stamps when performing their duties as the "checks and balances" and overseers of the public trust. Reading deserves better oversight of the monies designated for the benefit of Reading's children.

Linda Phillips

Willow Street

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