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## Lay off on teacher layoffs

**By Tom Mountain**

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Catholic elementary and high schools do an extraordinary job of educating a maximum number of students at minimal cost. Because they are parochial schools, they're deprived of any public funding on either the federal, state or local level. Their tax-exempt status is their only real indirect state benefit. Their funding comes from limited sources, such as tuition, alumni, fund raising and the archdiocese. Since their finances are limited, their school budgets are also constrained. They make do with less and stretch every dollar to the max. Administrative staff in Catholic schools is at a bare minimum; only those deemed absolutely necessary are hired - secretaries, nurses, coaches, principals, janitors. It's rare to find such nonessential non-teaching staff as curriculum and enrichment coordinators.

In Catholic schools, teachers are given top priority. In times of severe budget constraints, they never make public pronouncements about laying off teachers because this would be a last resort, and threatening to do so would be irrelevant since they can't shake down City Hall for extra tax revenue. Besides, to erroneously claim that they'd fire teachers as a first resort would be dishonest.

Yet in the Newton Public Schools, whenever there is perceived to be a budget shortfall, or the school administration just wants more money, the first people they threaten to lay off are the teachers. Not the overpaid administrators, the teachers. You'll never hear the superintendent threaten to cut some of his assistant superintendents because, after all, who among the public would object to that?

But teachers? That's an entirely different category. Threaten to cut teachers and enormous pressure will be brought to bear on the politicians to prevent these "layoffs" by shifting more money to the schools. Throw in the prediction that classroom size will increase from 20.2 to 20.5, and City Hall will dip into the rainy day fund and the schools will reap a windfall.

Which is what happened last week.

The addition of \$700,000 from the city treasury, combined with the \$7,265,000 from federal, state and private grants, have brought the schools' operating budget to a record \$139.5 million - and it's still not enough.

Student enrollment is down, and the school budget is up. As usual.

This is in contrast to the 1960s, when the Newton school population hit record highs while the school budget and staff were proportionally much lower than today.

So how can a six-figured Newton school administrator justify increased budgets at a time of lower student enrollment?

Class size.

All the administrator needs to do is establish the premise that smaller class size is critical for effective learning. Liberal think tanks can be utilized as references in the unlikely event that someone questions the premise. But the best strategy is to present small class size as a fact, not open for discussion. Keep harping away at the need to maintain lower class size. Preach it at every opportunity. And the money and staff will flow in.

Smaller classes mean more teachers, support staff, administrators. More classrooms mean more office space, more buildings. More bureaucracy. More teachers mean more union members, which translates into more union money and more political power.

The problem arises when critical analysis is utilized to challenge the small-class mantra, and the educrats are faced with the unusual dilemma of responding. The main study that they've relied on is the Tennessee Project Star, which conducted extensive research on class size from 1985-89. But the actual data indicated at best only modest academic improvement in grades K-3. In fact, where school districts decreased class size by 30 percent, expenditures for new teachers, classrooms and buildings increased by 25 percent. Studies by the Washington-based Brookings Institution and Stanford's Hoover Institution have further refuted the findings of the study: "The evidence about improvements in student achievement that can be attributed to smaller class size is meager and unconvincing ... while policies to reduce class size may enjoy popular political appeal, such policies are very expensive and according to evidence, quite ineffective."

But the zealous proponents of mandatory small class size dismiss any contrary evidence as academic heresy.

Autobiography is no substitute for analysis, but consider the experiences of those of us who attended school in the 1950s, '60s or '70s. At the time in Newton, as in most public schools, class size rarely dipped below 30. Former School Committee candidate Donna Mazzola can point to a picture of at least 30 students in her Burr School class in 1964. Dave Donahue, manager of Tody's in West Newton, can remember 39 students in his classroom at Franklin elementary in 1972. At my parochial school, there were 52 in my 1968 second-grade class.

Yet the obvious fact that we can all attest to is that we received a very good education. Most from that era will likely concur. And while all of us at one time or another had mediocre teachers, the vast majority were extremely competent and organized. Whether they taught a class of 30, 40 or even 52 children, what mattered was not the number of students in the classroom, but the teachers' ability ... to teach.

And the same rule applies today, despite the baseless rantings of the school bureaucrats who push lower class size for their own narrow ends.

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