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## Letter: Why I didn't run again for School Committee

Thursday, February 5, 2004

For the past year I have been thinking about whether to run for reelection to the School Committee. It has been one of the most difficult decisions in my life. Should I do "what I like to do" or do "what I ought to do"?"

I liked giving a voice to those in the community who paid taxes but had no voice on the committee. I really liked challenging the status quo. (Why do we have so many students who perform below grade level in the Stanford 9 testing of sixth graders?) As a determined "boat rocker," I challenged my colleagues to publicly discuss merit pay for teachers. I challenged the METCO program's lack of inclusiveness and their actions toward making it an illegal, racist program. (I challenge anyone in the community who thinks that I am wrong to come to RCTV, and let's have a public debate.) I challenged a School Committee student representative, Tim Kaldas, and other students to a public debate that was held on RCTV. (He is in college now; I'm waiting for part two of this debate when he comes back). I liked the challenge of trying to make structural changes in the education of students and to move the "unmovable" bureaucracy to fulfill its true objectives - increasing the performance and growth of students.

I didn't like the hours spent campaigning before I was elected. The many School Committee decisions about the appearance of the buildings, width of roads, and many others were important, but not meaningful enough to me. I especially didn't like the fact that not one person in this community, except for Tim Kaldas, accepted my many offers of debates about school issues. This was sad because it would have been a good way to inform the public about what factors really make a difference in education. I didn't like the new "freedom of speech rule" (I called it the "Russo gag rule") that the committee designed for me. I could not talk about my agenda items unless the majority of the School Committee members agreed. The peoples' voice that I represented was being restricted. (This would be a great topic of discussion for a civics class in the high school.)

I prayed about my decision. I was counseled and I consulted others. Every time I decided to run, my conscience pulled me back. This was going on month to month, then week to week for the past year. Finally what tipped the scale was my realization that I could achieve essentially the same results as I have with much less time by doing it another way. At each School Committee meeting there is an opportunity for any citizen in Reading to speak. At this time I will have even more freedom to speak than as a School Committee member!

At the same time, I can spend more time on my other Christian responsibilities such as the Catholic Church's reform in the sexual abuse issue, preparing meals for the hungry, increasing wage rates for the most vulnerable, and getting ready to help Community Parish Nursing - a great program in our community that helps our own without expecting the government to assume our community's responsibility - and others.

The School Committee has been my best experience in democracy (and lack thereof), community activism and consensus building. I look forward to continue working for the students' and community's best interest.

Arriverderci, School Committee!

*John F. Russo*

*School Committee member*

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