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## It's all about the kids except when it's about the money

Taylor Armerding

So how do you like the educational version of free agent frenzy we've got around here?

Yeah, we're talking puny six-figure salaries instead of seven or eight. But the little dance played out by school superintendents around the region who are looking for more bucks and long-term job security is right out of the baseball superstar playbook.

And the response of local communities comes from the same playbook.

Andover Superintendent Claudia Bach shows up last year as a finalist in Cambridge - just as tony as Andover, but more metro and more money - and it's as if Nomar were casting a wandering eye. The School Committee scrambles into private huddles and, without a word to the waiting public until the deal is long past done, signs her to a multiyear contract with raises that look moderate but that are sweetened by the usual "merit" incentives that, no one doubts, Bach will somehow be able to achieve without breaking a sweat.

Haverhill super Arthur Tate hits up his committee for a raise. They balk. He shops himself to Wakefield. They cave, to the tune of \$21,000.

Salem super Herb Levine doesn't make any public noise about leaving, but at the end of last year a lame-duck School Committee signs him to a long-term deal that will take him to retirement, saying they fear they might lose

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him. Where might they have gotten that idea?

In Beverly, William Lupini appears ready to defect the superintendency he's held for seven years for an even more lucrative one in Brookline.

Lawrence's Wilfredo Laboy, who let it slip last year that he's constantly courted by other districts, at least has a sense of timing. He waits until a few months after he finally passes the literacy portion of a competency test to seek his long-term deal, sealed about a week ago, which starts at \$156,000 and goes up from there, until 2010.

And then there's Methuen's Phil Littlefield, who came to his School Committee for a raise a few months ago, and when they weren't properly responsive, shopped himself to a school district in New Hampshire. On the local scene, it was as if Pedro were about to join the Yankees. The School Committee might as well be on bended knee as they renegotiate a contract that was supposed to have been good for the next four years.

Littlefield now claims he didn't know his departure would be so devastating to Methuen.

Sure.

But this, according to various sober analysts of the educational landscape, is just the reality of the marketplace. It has always been thus in the private sector. You don't get the raise you want, you threaten to go somewhere else. Why should it be any different for the CEOs of area school districts?

Well, how about because we are incessantly reminded, sometimes by these very superintendents, that public education is not like the private sector.

How about because it doesn't carry the same risks. If you fail in the private sector, you go out of business. If you fail in public education, you blame somebody else - "unfair" tests, parents, TV, the Internet, society, stingy

taxpayers - and are generally rewarded with more state money.

I suppose it is human nature to grab for all the cash you can. But it would be nice, while the money showers down upon these high-demand free agents, if there were an acknowledgement that, starting right at the top, it is not really "about the children," as we constantly hear. It is about richer contracts for adults.

All of these superintendents are smart, capable people. They are well aware of the financial struggles going on in their communities. They know that \$20,000 or \$30,000 can make a difference. It might buy more books. It might save most of a teacher's job. If it were really about the children, they would wait to ask fiscally strapped taxpayers for more money until the economy improved.

Even if they did, of course, it wouldn't rescue budgets that are in some cases millions of dollars out of balance. But the demand for richer, longer contracts is a powerful symbolic message that trickles down to the rest of the staff: Forget about the kids. Go for the money, just because you can.

Given that attitude, it is past time for local school committees to stop believing the fantasy these superintendents are selling - that they are irreplaceable. They're not. Nobody is. If Nomar and Pedro weren't around, some other highly motivated, gifted player would step up, and eventually will step up, to take their place. The same is true in education.

Communities will be better off in the long term to find somebody who cares more about the kids than money.

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