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## Letter: S.T.A.M.P. - Save The Arts and Music Programs

Friday, November 11, 2005

**T**o the editor:

I understand that once again the North Andover Arts and Music Programs are being targeted as a less than valuable part of the curriculum for our children. If the importance of these programs is under scrutiny, allow me to explain their worth to my family. I have two children in the North Andover school system, and have for nine years. They are now a sophomore and a junior at the high school.

In the elementary school years, it had been the practice to expose our children to the three 'Rs', in addition to music, the arts and sports. Both of my children participated in sports - softball, baseball and soccer. Not everyone is an athlete, so as competition became fiercer, interest in sports waned. We were lucky enough to have instrumental instruction in 5th grade. My son took up playing snare drum and continues to play percussion to this day. Will he be the next Buddy Rich? Probably not. Will he even continue his musical studies after graduation? I doubt it. But, Alex is a member of a group of his peers. He has learned discipline and responsibility to others. He has an appreciation of all types of music. He is my sophomore.

On the other side of the coin, my daughter did not have a group to belong to, did not participate in the music program and was not an athlete. She had an interest in art programs, but already four years ago the availability of art programs in the high school was limited. She found a group of peers, a group without direction, without structure, without interests. Did we get her back on track, yes. But she really needed something of value to grasp onto, and involvement in the arts is what involves her now. It is an area that she has little exposure to in the school, though, because the school programs are so limited. (Note: "so limited" is a generous statement.)

As a society, we spend lots of time and money on the support of athletics, yet at the high school level so few teenagers can participate - a chosen few. (Alex tried out for baseball, but was cut.) And yes, I understand that these are also now partially self-funded and valuable, but they never make it to a complete cut. Why would we consider doing this to the creative sect of our population?

We have some great people in our school system - Karen Halbauer, Pam Mesquita, Kathy Flanagan Jenkins and Mr. Cotter (although we lost him) to name a few. Don't take away some of the opportunities and tools

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that parents and teachers have to move our kids in the right direction. The school committee's decision will affect families with younger children more than mine at this point in time, but I firmly believe my tax dollars are well-spent on these programs. Please S.T.A.M.P. - Save The Arts and Music Programs.

Lisa A. Bartlett

Prescott Street

### **Ormsby needs to go back to school**

To the editor:

In reference to the recent mailing from North Andover School Committee member Dr. Charles Ormsby entitled "Two Years and Then Some ..." I would like to make a few comments.

I'm happy that Dr. Ormsby has taken it upon himself to send us a grading of his performance, because it gives us a good place to start a discussion, but self-assessment tends to lead to horrendous grade inflation, and we all know how much Dr. Ormsby hates grade inflation. So, let me do the grading.

We will start by establishing two acronyms to ease the way. We shall call Dr. Ormsby's new approach to education LIM - Less Is More. And we shall call the prior approach to education Mom - More Obtains More.

Looking at North Andover's academic goals and results, should we accept Dr. Ormsby's self-assessment that LIM was a success? Those students who had the most exposure to LIM, and had very little time with MOM, would be the early grades. What we see in the early grades is a disturbing drop-off in achievement. LIM obviously failed them. Dr. Ormsby tries to mitigate that failure by factoring in the results of the older students, those who spent years under Mom's loving embrace, but relatively little time under LIM. This would be equivalent to a relief pitcher coming in for the last out of the ninth inning, his team leading 5-0, and claiming he should be declared the winning pitcher when his team holds on to win 5-4. That's not how it works. The win goes to the earlier pitcher.

So why did the high school students do better? There are many factors that could be involved. The most startling change at the high school has been the new facility and the subsequent abandonment of the chaotic open concept. And what is a new school? Spending money on education and getting better results. More is more. Mom wins again.

So let's grade Dr. Ormsby on math. His core skills seemed adequate. He could calculate 20 percent of goal. Yet he showed no ability to apply his results in a meaningful way. I'm afraid I believe if you can't apply your skills, they have no value, so I'll have to give Dr. Ormsby and LIM an 'F'. But don't despair that Mom won out, Dr. Ormsby. That is how it should be. LIM goes contrary to how our economy works. Cost equals value. One does not buy a Kia expecting it to out-perform a Porsche.

Speaking of economics, let us now grade Dr. Ormsby on his knowledge of that subject. The central principle of the world economy is that instead of every country struggling at every task, nations perform those tasks that they excel at. The United States is not known for outdoing the rest of the world in the humdrum "core" areas. What our country does best is in the areas of creativity and innovation. The U.S. invents and the rest of the world follows. Software, computers, airplanes. You name it, we invented it. American movies are dubbed in dozens of languages. We don't watch movies made in Singapore. This is the result of an educational system rich with art, music, athletics, and other "non-core" areas that work to broaden a student's experiences. Yet Dr. Ormsby advocates an educational system that abandons our strength - creativity - and tries to take the world on in an area that we have not competed in successfully before, have no need to compete in, and probably won't succeed in. Why would anyone do that? The basic reason is because it is cheaper. The problem with it being cheaper is that because it is inexpensive, nations without our financial resources can more easily copy our system and compete with us head on.

So how did Dr. Ormsby fair in his understanding of economics? I'm afraid I'll have to give him and LIM another 'F'. Mom, you're still the best.

Let's try one last subject and see if we can't give Dr. Ormsby a passing grade in something. We'll try civics. Let's start with the Declaration of Independence; specifically Thomas Jefferson's understanding "that all men are created equal." From this basic American principles developed; equal rights, the end of slavery, anti-discrimination. Does Dr. Ormsby display an understanding of this cherished American principle? Sadly, he does not. He believes that teachers should be singled out to pay for the cost of educating our children. He was one of only two members of the school committee to vote to reduce the real income of teachers by close to 5 percent.

How did I arrive at 5 percent? We'll have to revisit math and economics, which Dr. Ormsby has already failed, to explain that figure. But first, let's get a bit of apparent misinformation out of the way. Dr. Ormsby claims that the real effect of the teachers contract is to raise the budget 6 percent. I'm going to stick my neck out a bit here and assume he is including the step increases. Do the step increases affect the budget? In an average year, no. With teacher retirements, resignations, and new hires, the average tenure should stay relatively stable. Years in which more teachers leave the system, the steps actually decrease the budget. Years in which very few teachers leave, the steps would increase overall salaries. But the expected impact is zero. So we'll use 3 percent, and I apologize if there is some other reason Dr. Ormsby thinks three is six, other than the 'F' I gave him in math.

So on with our grading. If nominal income increases 3 percent while inflation is 5 percent, then real income drops 2 percent. The official inflation figure for September was 4.7 percent, but I rounded it up so our math-challenged doctor won't have to deal with fractions. Also, the official inflation rate is considerably below real inflation because of the

odd way the government calculates housing costs, i.e. their use of rental rates instead of home prices.

While the School Committee was a bit less than generous, voting to decrease teacher's real income by about 2 percent, Dr. Ormsby voted to decrease their salaries a Scrooge-ish 5 percent. Why would he do that? To create for the rest of the townspeople taxes that amount to a 2.5 percent decrease (i.e. 2.5 percent nominal tax increase minus the 5 percent inflation rate.) If school teachers are asked to reduce their income by 5 percent, as Dr. Ormsby has asked, then the American principle of equality should dictate that the rest of us also accept a 5 percent decrease in our incomes. How do we achieve this equality? Well, I pay about 2 percent of my gross income in property taxes. My wife and I are probably more frugal than the average North Andover resident, so we'll round up to 5 percent as a good-guess average. Basically what Dr. Ormsby advocates for teachers would be, for the rest of us, the equivalent of a doubling of our property taxes.

Well, most of us believe in fairness, but no one wants to double property taxes, even for America and apple pie. So how do we distribute the pain equally? If teacher salaries use up approximately one half of the property taxes collected, and a pay increase of 5 percent is needed to keep teachers' real wages stable, then taxes would need to go up 2.5 percent to accomplish that. Using our assumption that property taxes take 5 percent of a family's income, then 2.5 percent times 5 percent equals .125 percent, or a little more than one-tenth of 1 percent.

So if everyone were willing to accept a one-tenth of 1 percent reduction in their income via increased property taxes, teachers would maintain their income at the current level. But our student, Dr. Ormsby, does not seem to understand this principle, and instead voted against equality and the American Way. So, alas, I'll have to give him an 'F' in civics.






Dr. Ormsby's report card is looking pretty dismal. Three 'F's. Isn't there any place I can give him a decent grade without being accused of engaging in grade inflation? Well, his spelling looks pretty good. Apparently, he excels at that core subject. Unfortunately he can't apply what he learned in his core classes to what is really important: application of knowledge being the ultimate goal of acquiring knowledge - that, and amazing your friends on Jeopardy. I'm afraid that the Doctor's 'A' in spelling can't overcome his other weaknesses. Overall I have to give him and LIM a 'D minus', and embrace MOM.

Take heart, Dr. Ormsby. You didn't fail. That means you don't have to pack your bag, leave town, and never darken our doors again, as you offered to do in your mailing. You just need to go back to school rather than struggle to run them.

David Tillman, CFA

Stonington Street

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