

## Huster calls for more communication

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**O**ver the past year, School Committee candidate Diane Huster has been uncomfortable with committee meetings that are now held at the new high school.

The committee sits on an elevated stage above the audience and snaps through agendas that often take less than an hour.

A veteran of past school committees, Huster remembers meetings that would last for hours with long debates on educational questions.

"There's no longer any conversation at the School Committee," she said. "There's no input, no presentations. Where's the give and take between the board and parents?"

If voters return Huster to the School Committee next month, the one thing she hopes to change is to increase the board's communication and discussion with the community.

"Communication is paramount," she said this week. "People have to feel free to ask questions. When I was chair, discussions would go on for two hours until every question was answered."

Huster, who served on the School Committee for 18 years, lost her seat in 2002 during a tough campaign that was accompanied by a bitter override battle. While she says she has enjoyed the free time over the past couple of years, she wants to return to the committee because the job she started isn't finished.

"I see my experience as a channel into how we can do better," she said.

Huster also feels that schools are running into an important juncture where tough decisions will have to be made against some hard economic realities. This year's budget is difficult, but Huster also sees some hard years ahead. She understands that taxpayers are already stretched and overrides are an unlikely solution. But she also feels schools are still trying to recover from a set of devastating cuts that were made during the early '90s.


"At some point the town is going to need to have a conversation about its priorities," she said.

As for this year's budget, Huster is still waiting for the dust to settle. Like other candidates and residents, she is deeply concerned about the lack of progress in building new programs and the possibility of severe cuts in existing staff.

For Huster, ground zero in the budget battle is the high school. With the school population growing each year and with staff layoffs now being threatened, she worries about North Andover High's accreditation.

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Last year, the high school was placed on warning status, because the accreditation board felt class sizes were too large and not enough programs and electives were being offered. North Andover High will be up for re-accreditation again in 2007. Huster said it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see problems ahead.

But she is also concerned with the difficulties on the immediate horizon and particularly with the proposal to close Bradstreet School, home to the town's kindergarten program.

Huster said she has a long list of questions that will need answers before she can support closing Bradstreet. She is concerned about relocating kindergarten classes to the town's elementary schools and wonders what will be lost in the move.

"What about the art rooms, the music rooms the computer rooms?" she asked.

Huster also worries that once Bradstreet is closed, it will never re-open as an early childhood center. The building is old and the town has managed to avoid required code updates because it has been grandfathered. But once the building closes, the town would be required to meet all new codes in order to reopen Bradstreet. And Huster said that's a renovation project the town will not be able to afford.

Huster believes all the problems ahead can be solved, but she feels it will take communication and cooperation between the School Committee, town officials and the community as a whole. She acknowledges that serving on the School Committee is a time-consuming job, but she insists the payoffs are well worth the effort.

"When I talk to parents, I see how excited they are about their children and their education," she said. "I get excited for them. I see the hope of a community working together and I know I can make a difference in making their hopes and dreams a reality."

As for the best part of the job, Huster said it comes ever year at North Andover High's graduation.

"It's watching the youth of our community accept their diploma with happy and proud parents looking into the future," she said.

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