

Letter: Committee is creating the space crunch

Thursday, August 19, 2004

In the July 29 editorial "Solutions and Excuses Conflict," parents were chastised for suggesting that an additional 4th grade teacher be hired and a regular full sized classroom, currently allotted for a special education resource room, be used for that additional 4th grade. The editor missed the real issues: school space, funding and priorities.

1. The request of the Killam 4th grade parents is one of fairness. Their children were bused for kindergarten and Reading has a twenty-five plus year history of busing to alleviate grade level overcrowding within the district. It is unfair for the School Committee to deny the Killam parents in light of historical busing just because they no longer want to bus. Furthermore, the recent offering of all-day kindergarten at the elementary schools results in two classrooms being unavailable for other uses at the schools. One wonders about "overcrowding" when the School Department now has space for all-day kindergarten. An examination of elementary school enrollments shows that they have decreased since 1997. It is a question of school department priorities!





2. A January 1998 memo from Killam Principal Guerrette to former Superintendent Harutunian indicated that Killam has five designated special education resource rooms to fulfill the needs of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Killam parents are well aware of these special education rooms. They recognize the School Committee is approving without scrutiny the administrator's actions and are unnecessarily taking a regular classroom out of use creating a space crisis at the Killam School.

3. The School Committee's blaming a lack of funds in denying the Killam parents' request does not withstand scrutiny! Last year, the School Committee insisted a \$3.1 million override was needed to "level service" fund the fiscal 2004 budget (fund the same level of services as the fiscal 2003 budget). Yet, out of public view, the School Committee quietly hired 12 additional education assistants, two special education teachers, and a nurse for that so-called "level service" budget.






4. Interestingly, the School Committee had enough money left over in the fiscal 2004 budget to move \$100,000 into building maintenance and over \$650,000 from the regular day and special education budgets into the three school construction projects above the legal cap approved by the voters and SBA! The legality of these actions is questionable and should be reviewed by the town attorney. In addition, the School Committee gave over \$32,000 (2004 fiscal year) in merit and vacation buy-back pay for school administration and staff. These special rewards apparently are a priority while the 4th graders at Killam are not. The School Committee seems to find money for whatever the committee wants and "cries wolf" when they want more.

5. By fueling an artificial space crisis and using full classrooms for only a few students, the School Committee attempts to conceal the extent to which the public was misled into supporting the school construction projects. My children were at the Barrows Elementary School when the elementary projects were

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being "sold" to an unsuspecting public. A full size classroom was taken off-line for use by a few special needs students at the same time that one portable classroom was vacant and used for storage. Yet, during the \$2.5 million debt exclusion campaign for additional elementary school building funds, this classroom was used as a "photo opportunity" to propagandize the space crisis.

Keeping the numbers high in Killam's 4th grade is purely an administrative choice, not a funding or space issue. The School Committee is trying to create a space crisis where none exists. Why? Because, if the taxpayers and parents realize they were misled by false enrollment projections and understated district-wide classroom space audits, they will not be eager to fund the upcoming debt exclusion for the Killam School or school budget operational overrides. The School Committee and their well-meaning but poorly informed supporters continue to perpetuate the overcrowding myth to promote school construction projects. If the schools are so overcrowded, why is the new high school significantly smaller than the existing one and the Barrows project also resulting in a smaller school? Reading, in reality, is reducing the capacity of the school system while claiming that rising enrollments have created the space crunch. The real question is: will Killam parents allow their children's needs to be sacrificed to perpetuate the school construction charade? How much more of the sham will Killam parents and their fellow taxpayers' swallow?

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