

June 22, 2006

To the Editor:

Anyone who attended the Lower Merion School District ("LMSD") Board meeting on June 19, or watches the re-broadcast on cable channel LMSD TV6, will realize that the Board squandered an historic opportunity to make a statement to the community that we can have excellent public schools and fiscal responsibility at the same time.

The meeting began with "good news" that the proposed 14.3% tax increase for 2006-07 would only have to be 10.8%. This was not because of any belt-tightening by the Board. Rather, it was because the latest version of Act 39 gave the Administration and Board the assurance that it would no longer have to play a "shell game" of artificially raising taxes in 2006-07 to circumvent a voter referendum in 2007-08. As you will notice by visiting the LMSD website, the Board and Administration will do whatever it takes to make sure that the voters do not get a chance to actually participate in a public referendum on the school budget. In fact, they continue to use public tax dollars to convince taxpayers that they should not be allowed to vote.

Board member Diane DiBonaventuro then made a resolution that the Board identify \$1,060,000 in cuts to the proposed \$170 million budget, so that the total tax increase could be less than 10.0%. The Board acknowledged that they had discussed cutting the budget by \$2.0 million just four days earlier, and that they still had eleven days to find the savings before the June 30 budget deadline. While members Novick and Friedlander supported the measure, members Rosenwald, Taylor, Gelfand, Kugel and Pliskin did not. They reasoned that finding a reduction of six-tenths of one percent would somehow permanently affect the quality of education in the district. Board member Gelfand even stated that it was better to give taxpayers a "verbal gesture" to reduce taxes rather than any actual savings.

A number of parents of current and former LMSD students spoke out against the budget. While the supporters of the budget often portray those who question aspects of the budget as "anti-public school", it was gratifying to see that there are many school parents who believe that we can have excellent schools while living within our means.

After much discussion and public comment, the budget was approved by the same 5 to 3 margin, with Board member Lorenz being absent due to military duty, but sending a letter in favor of fiscal responsibility and against the proposed budget. Board member Kugel confounded those who had attended the Budget meeting four days earlier by supporting a \$2.0 million budget cut on Thursday, but then voting against a \$1.0 million cut and for the status quo budget on Monday.

At the end of the day, after unprecedented public opposition and hours of hearings, this Board was not willing to cut even one dollar from its proposed budget. The majority stubbornly clung to the idea that every single line item in the budget (both capital and operating) is sacred. The Board could have sent a message that it was listening to the outrage. It could have engendered some good will in case there are future referenda on the budget. Instead they dug in their heels and wasted a golden opportunity.

On a final note, I went to the district website to read about the meeting and the passage of the budget. Did the website mention that three Board members voted against the budget? No. Did it mention that the Board passed a resolution committing to a top to bottom review of the budget to reduce unnecessary expenditures in the future? No. Did it mention the five hours of heated debate or the unprecedented interest from the community? No. Instead, the website celebrated the fact that the tax increase (without any construction costs) would be "only" 6.3 percent. Rather than mention that we spend more per pupil than any school district in Pennsylvania, the website continued to brag that (due to the high market value of our residential and commercial properties) our millage rate is lower than other districts. Unfortunately, after months of discussion, the mentality of the Administration and the majority of the Board still has not changed.

Please watch the re-broadcast of the June 19 meeting, and send your comments to [lmsdbudget.reform@verizon.net](mailto:lmsdbudget.reform@verizon.net).

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