

Smoothing the path ahead at Norwalk Public Schools

by Sherry Shameer Cohen

There is no denying it. The Norwalk Public Schools have been riding on extremely rough terrain recently. In addition to the usual issues such as achievement gaps and aging infrastructure, Norwalk schools have gone through a lot of drama recently. Susan Marks, the city's first female superintendent, resigned in July. The city cut \$6.3 million dollars from the school budget. Twenty-five teachers were laid off. The battle for the soul of Norwalk has never been as fierce as it is now. That said, Norwalk residents can look forward to a smoother journey for the public schools.

When Schools Superintendent Susan Marks resigned in July, citing personal reasons, there was speculation that the elements were against her. In addition to the budget crunch, there were personality conflicts. Heated arguments are nothing new to Norwalk, but the current plight is generating changes that are new and innovative for the Norwalk school system.

Chairman of the Board of Education Jack Chiaramonte praises Marks for creating "a great curriculum" in the two years she was the schools superintendent. She got grant money for the schools. She initiated the implementation of Go Math!, a comprehensive interactive program for kindergarten through sixth grade that meets the criteria of Common Core State Standards, which kicks in the 2014-2015 school year. She also brought to the schools Wireless Generation, a reading program in which both students and teachers use tablet computers. Teachers can spot check how students are answering questions. This information can supply a tremendous amount of information into a database, identify the students who need more differentiation, and identify the classrooms and teachers that need additional help. She brought in remote learning through APEX for 100 high school students. This is not about learning on a website, but engaging students, differentiating instructions for different learning styles, and expanding the reach of Advanced Placement studies.

Schools always need more money for new programs and new technology, but "this is the first year that cuts are impacting the kids," notes Chiaramonte. "We cut programs down to the bone. We've taken away many positions in the central office. We cut soap supplies for the janitors. Every

year we're doing with less and less."

Michael Lyons, chairman of curriculum and instruction committee, says that members of the Board of Education have "acknowledged that financial operations are poorly managed." Every year there is Sturm und Drang over the school budget, but the recent cuts threatened to close schools and end programs that were important to students. "No one can remember a situation where a lot of teachers and staff had to be laid off," he says. "It was a very wrenching process," but the board's decision to sacrifice some teachers helped the schools avoid cancelling the Academically Talented programs, sports programs and music programs. Members of the Board of Education agreed to create the position of chief financial officer to "get control of the system, to really get an understanding of our headcount and expenses, and try to prevent the continuous problem we've had for many years," says Lyons. They planned to fill the position in time for the new school year to begin with the goal of anticipating and controlling costs.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

The irony is that the budget cuts have been drastic despite some inventive cost savings measures that already took place. Norwalk was one of 10 school districts which participated in the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council's pilot program for Core Requirements. Lyons explains that by applying for the program, which will be mandatory in Connecticut in September 2013, the program cost the City of Norwalk not one penny. Another advantage is that by implementing the system as a pilot program, Norwalk school officials will help guide the program once it is in place in every school by stating which aspects are working or not working in the evaluation of teachers and administrators.

Another way the Norwalk Public Schools saved money is with an economy of scale at the high school level. Brien McMahon High School had a "beautiful facelift," says Beth Iovinelli, the mother of two children who attended the Norwalk Public Schools. One area of Brien McMahon is home to the Center for Global Studies, an inter-district international studies magnet school where students learn Chinese,

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Japanese and Arabic language, history and culture and travel overseas. Iovinelli calls it a “crowning jewel” and praises the collaborative measure with Brien McMahon. She says that the Center for Global Studies has a “community feel” to it because of the smaller school environment, yet students still have access to the other programs, including sports, that a larger school can provide.

Such measures have not been enough to avoid grueling battles for much needed funds. One new program to be implemented this fall is the Connecticut State Department of Education’s Student Success Plan. Guidance counselors and teachers will be required to help create individualized plans for students from sixth grade through high school. The plans are based on each student’s interests and strengths to set goals for academic, social, and personal development, including preparing them with 21st century skills for their careers. This state mandate does not include access to the state coffers.

Chiaromonte said he told Mayor Richard A. Moccia, “We need to go to Hartford and scream as loud as we can.” He is frustrated that the Education Cost Sharing Grant formula is “not fair.” It is 25 years old and based on the real estate grand list. “Many people are house rich and cash poor,” he notes and “renters are not included in the grand list.” He adds, “Education Cost Sharing is not just about schools. It’s a quality of life issue” because other services, such as lunch programs, need to be provided.

In addition, the Connecticut Department of Education’s grouping Norwalk in into District Reference Group (DRG) H does not make sense. The other towns in that district are Ansonia, Danbury, Derby, East Hartford, Meriden, Norwich, Stamford, and West Haven. Some may have demographics that are similar in education, income, occupation and enrollment, but the taxes are different. Chiaromonte explains the median income of Norwalk is \$83,000, but the taxes are higher than in some affluent towns such as West Hartford, which has a median income of \$99,000 and lower taxes. The state legislators are insensitive to disparities. “This is the Gold Coast,” Chiaromonte says, and “they think we’re filthy rich.”

STRONG TIES

Norwalk’s class sizes were the smallest in the DRG H, but after this budget, things will change. The high schools will be unaffected, says Lyons, and the middle schools will not be affected much. The elementary schools will go up to 22 to 23 students per class, with a few as high as 28. Chiaromonte notes that the Norwalk school teacher are among the most highly paid in the state. “We have great teachers,” he says. “We have great schools. I’m very proud of them.”

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So are parents. Evan Finchler, the father of a middle school student says, “The majority [of teachers] are very good, very enthusiastic and have lots of energy. They try innovative things with what limited resources they have.” Iovinelli was so impressed with the “enthusiasm and professionalism of teachers,” at the Center for Global Studies, “each one better than the next I wanted to sign up for the class!”

“Norwalk is a very giving town when it comes to education,” says Chiaromonte. A lot of Parent Teacher Organizations raise money to buy Promethean boards for the schools, which are more than just replacements for chalk boards or regular white boards. Teachers do not have to start from scratch every time they want to write a list or a formula. They can reevaluate how they teach a subject. They can save their pages, change them, print them, email them or upload them onto a website. It captures students’ attention and encourages their involvement as no blackboard, screen and overhead projector ever could because the subjects come alive. They have been used since the early 1990s, yet not every classroom has one.

“So many of the teachers spend their own money to move the class forward,” notes Finchler, a virtualization administrator and IT architect who volunteered on the technology committee at Columbus Magnet School. The budget battle, he says, “is not productive for anyone,” and he would like to see some accountability as well as compromise. “I guess the definition of compromise is that everyone walks away a little disappointed,” he says.

As much as the school system needs money for itself, “Norwalk Public Schools do a lot of great things for kids and their families,” says Eva Bartush, a Nathan Hale Middle School science teacher whose own children have attended the Norwalk Public Schools. She says, “At Norwalk High School every year they do a dodge ball tournament to raise money for charity. The kids form teams and have a lot of fun doing it. Last year Nathan Hale Middle School joined in on the fun and did their own tournament, too.”

People learn about Norwalk’s “diverse cultures through dance, fun games, and foods” on family nights, says Bartush, who was recently honored as 2011 Norwalk Teacher of the Year. About 35 percent of students come from homes where English is not the first language, note Chiaromonte. “You will never hear Norwalk teachers say, ‘I give up on this child,’” says Finchler. “Never!” ■