

September 22, 2010

Dear Parents and Community Members,

The 2010-2011 school year opened with some very good news. Stratton Elementary School was selected as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education. The Arlington Public Schools are proud of this extraordinary recognition and congratulate the principal, staff and students of Stratton for this great honor.

The Blue Ribbons Schools Program, which began in 1982, “honors public and private elementary, middle and high schools whose students achieve at very high levels or have made significant progress and helped close gaps in achievement, especially among disadvantaged and minority students. The program is part of a larger Department of Education effort to identify and disseminate knowledge about best school leadership and teaching practices.” (U.S. Dept. of Education)

Last spring, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) nominated Stratton Elementary School for this award. Nationally, 413 schools were nominated out of the 132,000 public and private schools. Of the nominated schools, 304 schools were selected for the award based on their application. In Massachusetts, eight schools received the award. Among the eight schools, the four other public elementary schools were located in Andover, Winchester, Lexington, and Wellesley.

In November, Principal Alan Brown will travel to Washington, D.C. for the award ceremony. Janice Satlak-Mott, who has been a teacher at Stratton since 1971, was chosen by her colleagues to represent the faculty at the ceremony.

Arlington #1 in MA for Lowest Obesity Rate Among Students

We also learned this past week that the Arlington Public Schools had the lowest obesity rate among all of the districts in the state. Much of the credit for this designation goes to the extensive physical education and wellness programming available to students, which has been developed by Cindy Bouvier, Director of Health, Wellness, and Guidance, the faculty in the Physical Education Department, and the Arlington Board of Health. . Please read the Wellness Report later in this newsletter.

Bridge The Gap Fund

We remain grateful to the organizers of the Bridge The Gap campaign and the contributors who donated nearly \$600,000 to the Arlington Public Schools to support programs and staffing that we would not have been able to fund otherwise. A complete list of the programs supported by Bridge The Gap can be found on the district website (<http://www.arlington.k12.ma.us/administration/budget/>)

Opening Day

Even the thunderstorms early Tuesday morning could not dampen the excitement of opening day. All schools reported a very smooth start to the new school year.

I want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of those who helped prepare the start of this new school year and express my gratitude. Thanks go to all of the 6th floor staff who worked all summer managing the large amount of paperwork necessary to open school; the custodians who worked in hot buildings cleaning and waxing floors and making needed repairs; administrators who worked long hours on student schedules; building secretaries who helped organize the opening of each building; teachers who offered their expertise to mentor new teachers during orientation; teachers who worked on curriculum this summer and teachers who participated in workshops or courses that we benefit from; our technology and IT staff who worked long hours to change our email system to a secure Google-based system; principals, curriculum leaders, and search committee volunteers who spent many hours reading resumes and interviewing candidates; and, the food service staff for their work preparing the kitchens for the start of a new year and serving a welcoming breakfast to new teachers during orientation and opening day.

Boston Magazine Ranks AHS in Top 50 Massachusetts High Schools

In the September edition of Boston Magazine, Arlington High School was recognized as one of the top 50 public high schools in the state. It is noteworthy that 35 of the 50 high schools had a larger per pupil cost than Arlington. The average cost for the 34 schools that ranked ahead of Arlington High School was \$14,223. Weston, which was ranked number one on the list, has a per pupil cost of \$18,023. Arlington's per pupil cost is \$11,813.

MCAS SCORES (The Boston Globe, September 15)

The Boston Globe identified the schools that were the highest performers on MCAS in Reading, English, Mathematics, and Science for grades 3-8 and 10.

Brackett was among the highest performers in the state for Third Grade Reading (#4), Fourth Grade English (#2), Fifth Grade English (#2); Fifth Grade Math (#2); Fifth Grade Science (#1).

Stratton was among the highest performers for Fifth Grade Math (#3); Fifth Grade Science (#6).

Peirce was among the highest performers for Fifth Grade Science (#4).

Their success is a source of pride for all of us.

2009-2010 \$1.5 Million Deficit

Despite our best efforts, we closed fiscal year 2010 (FY10) with a deficit of \$1.5 million due to lost revenue from grants, fees, and credits and increased out-of-district expenses in special education, which totaled \$2.6 million and broke down roughly as follows:

Grant Revenue Loss (\$220,000)
Reduction in Circuit Breaker (state reimbursement for SpEd tuitions) (\$450,000)
Late Collection of Special Education Tuition (\$350,000)
Reduced Distribution and Exhausted Credits from SpEd Collaborative (\$450,000)
Depressed Revenue from Fees and Other Sources (\$365,000)
Unanticipated Out-of-District SpEd Tuition Costs (\$800,000)

While I communicated throughout the year the shortfall in revenue and increased expenses, I could not project the final deficit with any confidence or surety given our system of tracking and reconciling revenue and expenses to budget. I am sorry that I did not communicate the severity of our problems as loudly or as early as I should have. Moreover, it was an outcome we were hoping to avoid through significant belt-tightening.

When the amount of the deficit became clear in June, our plan to deal with the shortfall was to pay some of our summer salaries out of FY11 funds. We had intended to make up the difference through continued belt-tightening during the 2010-2011 school year, and we were hoping for better-than-predicted revenue from grants, fees, and credits. The Town's auditors, however, disallowed this approach, informing us that Town Meeting must adjust budgets in order to effectively achieve the same goal.

Going forward, to prevent this from happening again, we have put in place a new tracking system that will give us the opportunity to make budget projections each month. In addition, the School Committee has hired the Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO), to analyze our business office operations and to make suggestions about how to improve our systems in general, including the new tracking system. While a new tracking system will not solve the problem of lost revenue or large unexpected expenses, it will give us the opportunity to make decisions earlier and to involve the town in trouble-shooting fiscal challenges.

I am personally committed to ensuring that communication with all concerned parties takes place on a regular basis going forward, so as to avoid future misunderstandings.

In the wake of the most recent news -- coming on the heels of very serious cuts to our programs and increases in fees -- how will the school district manage this year? Thanks to a strategy of conservative budgeting born of our FY 2010 experience, we expect to be able to fund most staff positions that were budgeted for in the spring or through Bridge The Gap Funds.

Additionally, we are seeing the following positive indications:

- Grants are projected to come in for the year at \$240,000 above original estimates.
- We are expecting \$260,000 in new special education transportation savings through our transportation collaborative with other communities.
- We learned this week that special education circuit breaker reimbursement will come in at nearly \$300,000 above anticipated budgeted amounts.
- The recently passed Federal Jobs Bill provided the District with a welcomed \$490,000 in revenue that prevented further lay-offs this year.
- We expect to be able to offset the loss with receipts of about \$300,000 that were received in July for services rendered last year.

We continue to operate in a very volatile environment, and I want to assure you that we are taking every measure we can to ensure that this does not inordinately detract from the learning experience of our students. I invite you to contact me with any questions or comments.

New Grants for 2010-2011 (report from Julie Dunn, APS Grant Writer)

The Arlington Public Schools have benefited from several grants recently, in areas ranging from school safety to curriculum offerings and professional development opportunities for teachers. These grants all have direct benefit to our students, with funding for these grants coming from federal, state, and local sources.

Readiness and Emergency Management Grant (REMS)

The nearly \$100,000, 18-month, Readiness and Emergency Management Grant from the US Department of Education has been a wonderful opportunity for the District to review, revise and standardize the District's crisis planning policies and procedures. Project Director Kathy Kaditz says, "While the scope of this grant is focused primarily on emergency planning and response, there are four phases to emergency planning, which includes prevention, mitigation, response and recovery. We believe prevention and mitigation or intervention before a crisis occurs, is far preferable than having need to respond. With that in mind and to the extent possible, we have incorporated resources on our emergency planning website to help students, parents and staff to identify and address safety concerns for students and schools before a crisis develops." This new section of the Arlington Public Schools website can easily be found highlighted in red at <http://www.arlington.k12.ma.us>.

To be completed by the end of 2010, the project has already resulted in revised comprehensive emergency plans for each school, flip charts for each classroom outlining

what to do in the case of all sorts of emergencies, and the training of school safety teams in the National Incident Management System - Incident Command System that would be in place in case of any emergency, as well as training on psychological first aid for school safety teams. Goals for the fall are focused primarily on training administrators, school safety teams, teachers, parents and students on school safety procedures and protocols in all four phases. Trainings on bullying and cyber-bullying, and procedures for identifying students at risk will be included, especially since Massachusetts just passed an anti-bullying law that schools need to implement by June, 2011.

Verizon Think Ahead Grant

Arlington High School (AHS) was one of only 15 high schools awarded a \$10,000 Think Ahead grant by Verizon Foundation. The AHS grant, “Encouraging Science Technology, Engineering and Math Careers” will help build career awareness and create an environment of experiential learning. This summer, AHS science teachers attended “Engineering the Future: Science, Technology, and the Design Process” at the Museum of Science. This institute provides the knowledge and skills necessary to develop and deliver a technology/engineering course that meets the MA frameworks requirements while demonstrating lab activities for technology/engineering standards. Teachers learned technology and engineering content and approaches that integrate science, technology and math through engineering. This grant also provides financial and material support for the High School Robotics and Engineering Club to allow it to apply key science and engineering concepts to build a robot and enter several robotics competitions. Assisted by grants such as this, AHS will continue to move ahead with 21st century instruction and hands-on opportunities for students.

Arlington Education Foundation (AEF)

Demonstrating the amazing generosity of local financial support for excellence in education, the Arlington Education Foundation (AEF) awarded its third and final year of its Enriching Elementary Education grant. A real strength of AEF grants are their ability to support key District goals, with this year’s grant providing a strong conclusion to the integration of global themes into the elementary social studies and literacy curricula. Describing summer workshops funded by AEF, Social Studies Curriculum Director Kerry Dunne said, “AEF provides the one chance that teachers have to work with uninterrupted time in small groups on curriculum design. This is also the rare opportunity where teachers are also provided the actual materials that they can incorporate into the new curriculum they are designing.” Fifth grade teachers attended a workshop on developing a research skills program that integrates research into all curriculum areas. First and second grade teachers’ workshops focused on linking the social studies curriculum to the literacy curriculum by identifying appropriate reading materials for grade one on Mexico and West Africa, and for grade two on Japan. The heavy literature focus in these topics supports student progress in both reading and social studies. Elementary teachers also attended a music presentation workshop, learning how to bring folktales and other stories to life through music.

This year's AEF grant, which totaled \$52,200, also includes funding for the District to start planning for its key goal of improving math differentiation and support while integrating the sciences and technology into the elementary and middle school curriculum. Several teachers and administrators attended the Gateway Institute at the Museum of Science and met for several days afterwards to work on a plan to link the elementary, middle and high school technology and engineering efforts. AEF funds also allowed the purchase of key math curriculum materials for all the elementary schools.

Mandarin Chinese Language Grant

An anonymous Arlington donor, learning that funding from the Department of State for the first Mandarin Chinese teacher at Arlington High School had been delayed by one year, offered a \$15,000 gift to AEF to be given to the high school to allow Mandarin Chinese to be offered for the first time. AHS has hired a part-time Mandarin Chinese teacher and purchased the necessary textbooks and other materials to begin its first offering of a non-European language this school year.

Teaching American History Grant

As noted in the press this month, Arlington was also awarded a prestigious Teaching American History Grant by the US Department of Education. This grant provides nearly \$1 million over three years for Arlington to lead a consortium of local schools focused on improving the teaching of American History. The grant will kick-off this year with a focus on improving American History instruction in grade 3, 4 and 5, covering topics from exploration through 1840. Project Director Kerry Dunne notes with enthusiasm that in addition to professional development offered during the school year, teachers will have opportunity to attend a summer institute at Framingham State College with support from the Gilder Lehrman Institute. Says Dunne, "This will provide Arlington with a long-overdue focus on elementary American History and will provide teachers with deep content area expertise and most current pedagogical practices in the field, including more reliance on primary source material."

Wellness Report – Cindy Bouvier, Director of Health, Wellness and Guidance

Arlington has always treated physical activity and good nutrition an important part of the school day. In 2006, under federal mandate we developed a Wellness Policy. Through this Wellness Policy, the school district takes action each year to improve nutrition education, physical activity, health education, school food services, and other food sources in schools. We believe that a comprehensive physical activity program encompasses opportunities for students to be physically active. Research indicates that physical activity has a positive impact on academic performance. Recent budget reductions have had a negative effect on elementary physical education time for this school year. We hope to restore physical education to twice a week for all students in the coming years.

Below are some of the initiatives that Arlington has taken in the past and continues to build on:

Comprehensive Health Education Program

- Nutrition Education begins in kindergarten and continues through high school.
- In grade 6, the Family and Consumer Science Department teaches students how to choose healthy foods and prepare balanced meals.

Physical Education Program

- The elementary program encourages lifetime fitness as well daily physical activity.
- There are several district-wide initiatives that encourage fitness:
 - Early morning walking groups and fitness workouts
 - The Ottoson Am/Pm program and the 5-2-1 after school fitness programs service hundreds of students
 - The Fitness Room at AHS is open to all students and staff daily and after school free of charge.
- Yearly assessments through Fitnessgram measure strength, flexibility, endurance and BMI. A yearly report card is sent home with students in Physical Education K-12 that tracks their progress through the years and measures their progress according to the Health Fitness Zone.

Nursing

- Participation in Children's Hospital study on Childhood Obesity.
- Participation in BMI measurements.
- Lunch groups for students needing guidance with proper nutrition and physical activity.

Food Services

- Fruits and Vegetables offered in the lunch program every day.
- Staff encourages students to make good food choices.
- Low fat milk and beverages are only choices sold.
- Salad Bars and only low fat and/or baked snacks available.
- New Food Purchasing system at AHS and Ottoson MS allows parents to use the Internet to post money to their account for lunch purchases. Parents are able to view the choices their children are making.

We look forward to a successful year ahead. I speak for all of the APS teachers, staff and administrators in thanking you for your support.

Best regards,

Kathleen Bodie, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools