

School spending is never enough

By: Geoffrey P Hunt

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Rites of spring in Ipswich — kite flying at Crane Beach, youth soccer sign-ups, maple sugaring, and pothole patching — would be incomplete without the annual hand wringing over the Ipswich public school budget. The same arguments are recycled every year. And just like any other year, we've yet to be presented with any compelling reason to exact more tolls from beleaguered taxpayers— specifically the proposed \$2.75 million override — when the results to be gained are illusory and elusive, neither specified nor measurable.

There is an undeniable emotional quotient to the pleas for higher public school spending. How can we be so irresponsible in shortchanging the children? How do we maintain property values, attracting upscale families and high-tech workers, without a competitive school system?

Yet, more money for Ipswich public schools doesn't correlate with better outcomes. And why should a higher proportion of town resources be devoted to a school system whose enrollment is dropping, on par with population trends, having little connection to whether Ipswich spends more or less on its schools?

Data are stubborn and inconvenient. According to the Massachusetts Department of Education, since 2006 Ipswich annual school spending has increased by \$5 million, nearly 4.5 percent per year, from \$16 million to \$21 million. Spending per pupil has increased from \$9,042 to \$11,548 — 4 percent per year. Yet SAT math scores have barely stirred. The most recent eight-year SAT math average is 534, ranging from 523 in 2006 to 546 in 2010 to 543 last year.

The high water mark for Ipswich SAT math scores was 555 in 2005 — before the last school budget override. And better than Hamilton-Wenham whose SAT math score eight years later in 2013 was 553 despite H-W having spent \$14,759 per student, \$3,000 per pupil more than Ipswich in 2013.

At Pentucket, spending in 2013 was \$11,821 per pupil vs. Hamilton-Wenham at \$14,759, while SAT math scores in 2013 at both schools were virtually identical at 554 and 553.

Census data tell us the Ipswich population has been virtually unchanged from 2000 to 2010 with 23 percent under age 18 in both time periods. In 2000, 30 percent of Ipswich households had children under age 18, while by 2010 that household proportion of under-18 fell to 26.8 percent.

Moreover, Ipswich public school enrollment has been falling from a high of 2,137 in 2009 to 1,986 last year. Students enrolled in grades 11 through 12 combined were 316 in 2013, down from 322 in 2006. Average 3rd-grade enrollment over eight years since 2006 has been 155, while average class size for 12th grade has been 161. Third grade alone in 2013 at 166 had two fewer than did the 2013 graduating senior class. In fact, K-3 enrollment in 2013 as compared to K-3 in 1993 was 8 percent lower — 50 fewer students.

So, Ipswich taxpayers should finance a \$2.75 million override, raising average property taxes by some \$500, for a shrinking school system?

The number of Ipswich High School graduates attending college is nearly the same in 2013 at 81 percent as it was in 2006 at 82 percent. And the number of Ipswich children opting for private schools hasn't budged much in 20 years — 9.5 percent in 1993, 10 percent in 2005, 8.5 percent in 2012, probably reflecting overall economic conditions — household income — more than any other factor.

So, Ipswich taxpayers should finance a \$2.75 million override, raising average property taxes by some \$500, when student outcomes are indistinguishable over a decade, and there is no discernable incremental flight to better alternatives over a 20-year span?

Face it — higher public school spending doesn't equal better outcomes. In fact the level of spending — higher or lower — doesn't have much effect on outcomes, period.

The 40-year nationwide study State Education Trends — Academic Performance and Spending Over the Past 40 Years by the Cato Institute, published two weeks ago, is now dispositive in proving that the level of public school spending — as well as increases and decreases — has no effect on outcomes. None.

As the Cato study prefaces its findings:

"Parents often share the view expressed by Horace Mann, godfather of American public schooling: they want their children to have better educational options than they had. They want the best. Aware of this fact, state policy-makers constantly seek to improve public school outcomes (or, for the politically jaded, they at least wish to appear to be doing so). But how well are they succeeding?

"At the national level, the results do not look good. The performance of 17-year-olds has been essentially stagnant across all subjects since the federal government began collecting trend data around 1970, despite a near tripling of the inflation-adjusted cost of putting a child through the K-12 system."

Well, the debate over Ipswich public school spending begs a memorable quip from a well known recent U.S. Secretary of State, "What difference does it make?"
It doesn't.

Instead, a more noble override would fix Ipswich road potholes and craters. At least the outcomes would be specific and measurable, unlike shoveling more dollars into public schools, a bottomless pit with a dubious return.

Geoffrey P Hunt is a former member of the Ipswich Finance Committee.