



Lexington Public Schools

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Our Schools

February 8, 2007

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New superintendents are often asked, "What is your vision for the school system?" A year and a half ago, when asked this question, I replied, "Academic excellence, caring and respectful relationships, and continuous improvement." While it is true that our primary purpose must be the continuous improvement of educational services for students, we must also continuously improve our financial operations. So, in hiring, I have focused on bringing people into the central office with extensive experience and solid credentials. One recent example is Mary Ellen Dunn who joined the Lexington Public Schools as the Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Business this past November.

Mary Ellen came to us most recently from a similar position with the Natick Public Schools and prior to that the Needham Public Schools. These are both school districts grappling with the same pressures and challenges as our schools here in Lexington.

In addition to holding senior positions in business administration for Massachusetts public schools, Mary Ellen has strong credentials in other arenas of public finance. At the municipal level, she served the town of Sudbury as Treasurer in the accounting and finance department. At the federal level, she was an evaluator and auditor in the US Government's General Accounting Office in Boston, where she was recruited to review and revise federal programs and policies.

Simply put, Mary Ellen is highly qualified to take on the responsibility of managing the business office for the Lexington Public Schools. Though she joined us as recently as November, she has already made successful improvements that speak to her qualifications.

When teachers need supplies for a classroom, they contact the school's secretary who then contacts the central business office personnel for approval, and who then places the order. Mary Ellen has reduced processing time so that orders are placed and properly recorded with accounting in 24 to 48 hours. She has eliminated the use of open purchase orders, strengthening the tracking of and planning for needed teaching supplies. All of this means that we can record each transaction quickly and accurately and have a clear understanding of our inventories and what monies we have available.

She is in the process of reviewing and pre-approving our supply vendors, so we are assured of the best available prices and services. To implement best practices, she has started posting financial procedures online and is meeting with staff to train them and answer questions. Her philosophy, and one I share, is to set a high level of efficient customer service for educators and staff while simultaneously tightening procurement requirements.

The changes we've made so far in procurement and accounting procedures, both in the business office and in the human resources office, have enhanced this year's budget development process as well. Director of Human Resources Carol Ann Gregory and her staff spent the summer of 2006 improving documentation of school staffing assignments and hours. This in turn better informed our payroll processes and enabled Mary Ellen to provide the principals and department heads with detailed information as they developed their budgets for the coming year.

Like any other well functioning organization, we strive to continuously improve in all aspects of what we do. Over time, Mary Ellen will touch and enhance many areas of our operations. She will begin a methodical reevaluation of the cost of each educational program. Her goal is to present the total cost of running our educational programs. Whether it is athletics, adult education, music or math, Mary Ellen will identify all the expense and revenue components of that program.

All contracts will be reviewed to ensure that the interests of the Lexington Public Schools are properly represented. For example, we will evaluate our contract for food services in order to insure high nutritional standards at a fair price.

The more complete the information available to the School Committee, the administration and the community, the more thorough and thoughtful discussions we have about setting our priorities. Mary Ellen's plan to incorporate the answers to questions she receives from the community into the fabric of the publicly available budget document will expand communication and address and assuage any remaining community concerns.

In spite of Mary Ellen's short tenure with us, I applaud her achievements just as I applaud the daily accomplishments of the entire central office staff. The depth and breadth of Mary Ellen's experience in public finance make her an excellent addition to our team. Please join me in welcoming Mary Ellen Dunn to our schools.