

From the Desk of the Superintendent
Stephen Cullinan, Ellington Superintendent of Schools

“We’re Number One – Or Not” (Revised)

I recently sent an e-mail to the members of the Board of Education with the above title. Most members of the Board are familiar with my sense of humor and I am sure they immediately detected my sarcasm. Some may have even anticipated the content of my communication from the title. Although the title may have contained some humor, the content certainly did not.

Most citizens of Connecticut know that there are 169 towns and cities in the state. When analyzing school statistics by district/municipality that number becomes 166. I have never compared the lists to note the difference, but all data is analyzed and presented by the Connecticut State Department of Education. All school districts in Connecticut are required to submit a multitude of annual data reports. One such report contains all financial data from the previous school year.

One major statistic that is reported annually is Net Current Expenditures per Pupil (NCEP). School districts contain many similarities, yet they can also be quite different. Districts differ in grade configuration, size and composition of student population, and urban/suburban/rural settings among others. Annually, financial statistics are compared across a variety of categories. The full report for 2010-2011 has yet to be released; however, the significant comparison of how much money each district spends per pupil it educates was published by the Connecticut State Department of Education in November.

The data provided by the Connecticut State Department of Education revealed that for the 2010-2011 school year (last year) the Ellington Public Schools ranked number 166 out of 166 in educational spending per pupil. That places the Ellington Public Schools last in per pupil spending in the state. It is fact that Ellington spends less than every other district in the State of Connecticut on a per pupil basis. This data is readily available on the Connecticut State Department of Education’s website.

The Town of Ellington is certainly not last in the state in terms of town wealth. When using the Adjusted Equalized Net Grand List per Capita (AENGLC) Ellington ranks number 106 in town wealth. When using the Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) formula Ellington ranks number 120 in wealth. There are numerous statistics related to student achievement data. Across all measures of student achievement the Ellington Public Schools are consistently in the top twenty-five to thirty-five percent.

What does being last in per pupil spending look like when compared to other districts and its impact upon the entire budget? Data from 2010-2011 reveals

that, if the Ellington Public Schools had the per pupil spending of the districts below, the entire budget would need to be increased as follows:

Tolland	Add	\$ 999,908
Granby	Add	\$ 3,925,463
Somers	Add	\$ 4,799,009
Suffield	Add	\$ 5,054,480
Coventry	Add	\$ 6,048,894
Stafford	Add	\$ 6,606,535
South Windsor	Add	\$ 8,477,242
Vernon	Add	\$ 8,732,713
Bolton	Add	\$ 9,394,740
East Windsor	Add	\$10,798,457

Let's look at it by per pupil ranking. Instead of being number 166 if Ellington were:

160	Add	\$1,610,475
150	Add	\$3,234,575
140	Add	\$3,975,775
130	Add	\$4,866,850
120	Add	\$5,341,000
106	Add	\$8,147,750

I can continue to list numbers but the results would be redundant. In terms of spending per pupil, the Ellington Public Schools are certainly not number one. Upon reading the above I'd like to know your thoughts and reactions. Please do not misinterpret my intent in this communication. The Ellington Public Schools are a wonderful place for children to be educated. We are proud of the achievement of our students within the resources provided. However, the above should invoke an inquiry as to what services and programs would be available to the students in Ellington if we were not the lowest in the State of Connecticut in spending per pupil. That sounds like an appropriate topic for future contemplation.

The above commentary did not elicit much response when posted on my blog. This is most likely the result of the limited readership of my Superintendent's Blog. I do not believe it is the result of a lack of opinion on the topic. I did receive two responses to this posting. One can be viewed on the district website. The other came via e-mail. The posted commentary (I encourage you to read it) while indicating sadness regarding this state of affairs, recommends a

healthy dialogue on what services and programs we should be offering to the children of Ellington. The e-mail offered kudos as this is a “feather in your cap”.

Those who know me would probably state that I am fiscally conservative. My wife would agree with that statement with the exception being what is spent on our two children. I believe that for many of us, when it comes to our own children, we can never do enough. I believe that many, if not all, administrators in the district know how difficult it can be to get the superintendent to approve the expenditure of money. During budget deliberations one member of the Board of Education regularly refers to me as “The Grinch.” Thus, getting the most effective and efficient services for our money is a source of pride for our district. However, failure to provide the programs and services that the students in Ellington need to be successful in the global economy is inexcusable. There is a need and we must address it.

Next year the federal Jobs in Education Fund will expire. This means a loss of approximately one-half million dollars in federal support for the Ellington Public Schools. These funds are needed to support the following positions: 1.28 FTE Special Education, 1.0 FTE School Psychologist, 1.0 FTE Guidance Counselor, 1.0 Elementary Classroom, 1.0 FTE Music, .5 FTE Remedial Reading, and .4 FTE Mathematics, as well as eight at-will classroom support positions. In my opinion, the loss of these positions would be devastating for the students in the district.

The upcoming budget cycle may be the most difficult one in many years. The loss of federal funding as described above, coupled with a significant increase in health insurance costs, will demand more revenue to meet existing need. When one considers that we are already last in per pupil spending in Connecticut, my fear is how far behind we will fall. We need to build for the future, yet I fear we will be forced to take a step back into the past. We need to create a plan that will meet the educational needs of all of our students in a rapidly changing, increasingly technological, global society. We have already won the race to the bottom (in terms of per pupil spending). Whether we remain there or how much further behind we fall is to be determined.

As stated earlier, the achievement of the students in the Ellington Public Schools far exceeds its rankings in terms of town wealth or per pupil spending. That is a tribute to our students, their families, our staff and the wider Ellington community. There is a challenge before us. That challenge is not to continue to achieve as we have in the past, but for our students to achieve at higher and higher levels. That is what the future will demand of them and of their country. We must do all we can to assist each and every student to be prepared to meet the ever changing challenges and opportunities that await them. We can settle for nothing less. Your response is welcome at the Superintendent’s Blog on the website for the Ellington Public Schools, www.ellingtonpublicschools.org.