



Message from School Committee Vice Chair, Carl Nylen

Great schools. Those words, and questions about them, have occupied my mind over the past nine years. What does a great school system look like? Are we one? How do we become one? Answers to these questions may vary, but I think most would agree that the goal of great schools is one worth striving for. And not for the satisfying but superficial reward that comes from the latest best schools list, but for the substantive and sustained impact such schools have on the students, staff, families, and communities who make them possible.

I see evidence of greatness in places all over the Ipswich Schools and see little reason why they cannot coalesce into greatness everywhere. Achieving it I think requires that we recognize and seize the windows of opportunity for accelerated growth that open from time to time. Strange as it may seem to say in the midst of a global pandemic, I believe such a window of opportunity is open to us now. I cannot remember a time when conditions aligned to better support a push to greatness; talented staff, rising student performance, devoted parents and families, a supportive community, healthy budgets, and an innovation fund that is the envy of the public education world. What more could we ask for? Certainly, challenges remain but none that cannot be overcome by drawing on these strengths. It seems to me therefore that the progress of our schools toward greatness will be determined not by what more we are given, but how or if we take advantage of what we have, how or if we set aside any differences and join together in support of a common purpose and future, and how or if we push one another from the School Committee to the Superintendent, from administrators to staff, from parents to volunteers, to accept no less than excellence in all pursuits from the routine to the remarkable.

If ever there was a year that demonstrated what we can achieve by embracing our strengths, joining together, and pushing one another to perform it has been this school year. It confirmed what Ipswich Public Schools are capable of, despite the odds, and it should prove that no future is out of reach, most particularly a future of great schools. I for one look forward to helping seize the opportunity and accelerating the pace toward that future. I trust you do too.

Return to Learn Update

On April 27th, the Middle and High schools welcomed their students and staff back to full in-person learning, following the elementary schools return on April 5th. A few students from each school have chosen to remain remote, but a large majority of students are back in the classroom and happy to see their friends and teachers! Last week was the first in quite a while with no new cases reported, and our diligent nursing staff continue to track and contact trace any new cases. As greater numbers of adults and older teens in Massachusetts are vaccinated against COVID-19 we hope to see case numbers continue to decrease in Ipswich and all of Massachusetts.

The lower case numbers are great news for the end of the year school events which are detailed at the end of this newsletter. From Crane's Beach Day to the prom, students will be able to enjoy special activities which were cancelled last year due to the pandemic, while following the same prevention strategies to keep everyone safe.

As always, it is critical that all parents reinforce the importance of social distancing and mask wearing with their children. The Ipswich Public Schools continue to request that students returning from any travel out of state for more than 24 hours produce a negative test or quarantine before returning to school in adherence with the [Governor's COVID-19 Travel Advisory](#), which remains in effect. Students who are fully vaccinated and are without symptoms are exempt from this.

Updates to the District's Return to Learn Plan have been compiled into an Addendum to reflect changes and revised guidance from the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the MA Department of Public Health. You can find the Addendum on the District's website. Additional addendums will be published as circumstances change and new information becomes available.

School Budget

Our last newsletter focused on the structure of our school budget and the need for periodic operational overrides. In this edition, we felt it was worthwhile to discuss in more detail why Ipswich and many other towns must operate school systems under the dark cloud of a structural deficit.

In simple terms, a structural deficit exists when the district's recurring expenses increase at a faster rate than recurring revenues. On average, our school budget increases by about 4.5% per year. Massachusetts towns are allowed by law to raise property taxes by 2.5% each year thanks to "Proposition 2.5". New growth within the town adds an additional .6% in tax revenue in a typical year as a result of new real estate development or increased assessments in Ipswich. The spread between total revenue increase of 3.1% and 4.5% in expense increases represents our annual deficit. By definition, a structural deficit compounds each year unless costs decrease or revenues increase.

The obvious question is “why don’t you manage your budget to keep it in line with revenues?” The answer is not so easy. Approximately 80% of the school department budget is allocated to salary and benefits for our staff. As with every school district, salaries increase at an annual rate based on the contracts negotiated with the various unions (i.e. teachers, custodians, etc.). Health insurance costs increase by varying amounts and are very unpredictable (the schools pay 60% of health insurance premiums for our staff). To keep annual expenses in line with revenues would require the schools to lay off staff in “bad” years and hire them back in “good” years. This model simply isn’t conducive to offering a high quality education to our kids. Programs would be cut (as they were in 2014 when an operational override failed to pass) and Ipswich would struggle to attract the high quality teachers we need if the constant threat of a layoff hung over their heads.

Our Superintendent and administrative team, in conjunction with the School Committee, is tasked with providing a robust educational curriculum and adequate staffing levels for our students in a fiscally responsible manner. Class sizes and curriculum offerings are reviewed each year and staffing is adjusted accordingly. This balance is never easy and Ipswich is not alone. Many other towns face the same revenue challenges we do. Ipswich has very little commercial tax revenue to draw from which means the burden of providing the revenue needed to run both the Town and Schools falls on the backs of residential homeowners.

The School Committee believes that it is important to make all taxpayers aware of the details that go into our annual school budget process. As always, please don’t hesitate to contact us with any questions.

Ipswich Education Foundation (IEF)

The Athletics subcommittee of the IEF plays an important role by providing much needed resources to our athletic department. This group has led the way in fundraising for a future locker room and concession area at our turf field. For several years they organized a very successful golf tournament at Turner Hill which raised significant funds for the athletic department. The Athletics subcommittee is routinely called upon to help cover expenses that are not included in the school budget (ie. uniforms and athletic equipment). Having the support of the IEF is critical to the success of our athletic programs.

4th Annual STEAM Showcase

The 4th annual STEAM Showcase is scheduled for the week of May 24th-28th. It will be a week full of after-school virtual workshops geared for all ages (registration required - [click here](#) to register. All workshops are on Zoom). Workshops will be as interactive as possible and offerings range from robotics to code breaking to learning about messenger RNA-based vaccines and climate change! There will also be a website full of pre-recorded STEAM videos submitted by teachers, students, and community groups. Please visit the [district website](#) for a link to the STEAM Showcase site starting Friday May 21st. A special thanks to the Ipswich Education Foundation for helping fund many of the workshops!

Saying goodbye is never easy

Saying goodbye to long-time colleagues of the Ipswich public schools is never easy. This Spring we say a bittersweet farewell to our retiring elementary principals Sheila Halloran and Sheila McAdams, as well as our long-serving Director of Finance and Operations, Joanne Cuff. The Ipswich School Committee cannot thank them enough for their dedication, passion, and commitment to our schools and our children. Change is hard, and these are big shoes to fill. We wish them well in their retirement years, they are well deserved!

School Committee Meeting Highlights

April

- High School music program student recognition
- Preparation for Bean Counting
- School Facilities workshop with outside facilitator
- Return to in-person learning updates

May

- School reopening update
- End-of-year events update
- Finance Director search update
- School Choice discussion

Upcoming District and End of Year Events

- **May 24-28:** 4th Annual STEAM Showcase (Virtual)
- **June 3:** Senior Prom
- **June 4:** Move up day for Winthrop and Doyon 5th graders
- **June 7:** Baccalaureate
- **June 14:** Ipswich High School graduation
- **June 16:** Crane Beach Day
- **June 17:** Ipswich Middle School graduation; Doyon 5th grade graduation
- **June 18:** Winthrop 5th grade graduation

* School Committee Open Session Meetings are typically held on the first and third Thursday of the month in the MS/HS Ensemble Room located at 134 High Street, Ipswich and begin at 7:00 PM. Meeting agendas, minutes, folders with applicable meeting documents, and calendar may be found on the [district website](#). These meetings are broadcast live on ICAM. To view these meetings, please tune into Comcast Channel 98 and Verizon Channel 31. Meetings can also be viewed on the ICAM Ipswich website: www.icamipswich.com. On March 12, 2020, Governor Baker issued an executive order suspending certain provisions to the Open Meeting Law, to enable public bodies to carry out their responsibilities while adhering to public health recommendations regarding social distancing. As such, while the School Committee members meet in person in the MS/HS Ensemble Room, these meetings are simultaneously held over Zoom to ensure real-time public access.

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The Ipswich School Committee places great value on feedback from our community and welcomes the opportunity for dialogue and transparency. Per our policy, communication sent to the School Committee as a group is replied to by the School Committee Chair.

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