



Time and administrative guts get school system working

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By Julia Steiny

This is the first of series of three stories about how the pressures of Proposition 21/2 combined with creative management to improve schools in Barnstable, Mass.

Barnstable, Mass., situated on the bucolic bicep of Cape Cod's arm, swells to 150,000 residents in the summer. Roughly 50,000 people remain year round. For longer than these townspeople care to remember, they lived in the grip of seemingly endless political wars. Gutsy decisions won them back the peace they now enjoy.

Their story begins back in 1982. Frustrated with its "Taxachusetts" reputation, state lawmakers implemented a property-tax reform called Proposition 21/2, limiting annual local property tax increases to 2 1/2 percent. Such legislation forces municipal leaders and school committees to live within significantly tighter budget constraints than they'd been used to. And since school budgets make up a huge portion of town expenses, these restrictions often pit the town against the schools.

Rhode Island recently passed an analogous law, called S3050. While using a different method to achieve the same goal of controlling property taxes, the state's communities and their schools are starting to face similar challenges.

By the late 1990s, a \$2.7-million deficit had "snuck up" on Barnstable's School Department. As is typical, the School Department turned to the town to bail it out. But the municipal government had financial problems of its own and resented the education community's righteous assumption that schools were entitled to soak up the available money and then some. In public meetings, the town would explain every penny of its budget with a document the size of a phone book. Conversely, the then-superintendent of schools would send over two, maybe three brief pages, and act insulted when pressed for more details. With poor information and worse communication, the town and a large portion of the taxpaying public had little sympathy for the schools' fiscal plight. Rumors flew. Tempers flared. Parents and school employees were enraged by what they perceived to be the town's stinginess.

As Thomas McDonald, the new superintendent and hero of this story, says, "The politics were very, very ugly."

Art, music and other grace notes began to disappear from the schools. Even as taxes in Barnstable rose every year to the legal maximum, the School Department imposed user fees for sports and student transportation. And while the town was also cutting its own staff and services, the cuts to the schools made better, more emotional stories for the newspapers, which inflamed already-distressed parents. The public no longer trusted that the schools were well-managed, so lobbying for additional school aid fell on deaf ears.

And loud disputes between the School Committee and the superintendent were hardly reassuring.

The festering animosity had gotten so bad, the crusty town attorney, Robert Smith, said, "We felt the best the town and School Department could hope for was a civilized divorce. With the limitations of Proposition 21/2, the schools and town were fighting over the same tax dollar. It was like being the zookeeper who's got to carry in the meat to feed the bear and the lion in the same cage. And there's not enough meat. So the idea of a civilized divorce was to give them their own part of 21/2 to manage as they could."

At least, that was the town's point of view.

Janet Joakim, now a town councilor, once worked as an employee of the schools. She says, "At union meetings people talked about the town's 'free cash,' and you had images of a fortune sitting in a drawer somewhere. Now I know it's a council policy to set aside savings for long-term projects, but at the time, people thought that the town was keeping big pots of money away from the kids."

Furthermore, as the parent of three students, Joakim worked on three failed efforts to rally enough votes to override Prop 21/2. Her kids' schools were losing programs and resources. "The animosity among us," she growls, "was bad."

Like other Massachusetts coastal communities, Barnstable is at a disadvantage when the state allocates aid to local education. Massachusetts' state-aid formula is designed to help property-poor towns with limited ability to raise money. A summer-home community such as Barnstable has massive property value — ranked in the richest quartile of Massachusetts cities and towns — but a much more modest median family income — ranked in the bottom quartile. Joakim's husband is a union glazer. A large number of the year-round residents are low-income, Brazilian and other immigrant families who work in the tourist industry.

But the town couldn't keep propping up the ever-needy schools. For a long dark time, the only available solution seemed to be Smith's "civilized divorce."

Whether in Taxachusetts or our own Rogue's Island, out-of-control property taxes cripple the ability of governments to function effectively, and inevitably split communities into warring factions. And at least initially, laws such as Prop 21/2 and S3050 only increase the animosity. But these sorts of community conflicts are not merely inevitable, but also necessary to ensure that municipalities clean house and operate with maximum effectiveness. Doing business as it has always been done is comfortable, but not creative and often terribly inefficient.

Communities have choices. They can always keep fighting, for example.

Or the different factions can get over feeling owed or entitled, and collectively fashion bold, creative solutions that will probably require everyone to make some changes.

Next week Barnstable's story will offer us the first of several usable examples of solutions that improve how the municipality functions and serve the best interests of the kids.

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