

Some communities cheating students out of mandated funding

In this tough economic landscape, school districts throughout the state are doing their best to keep budgets tight down to the last hole on the belt.

That's to be expected.

To learn from Mahar Regional Schools and Orange Elementary Schools Superintendent Michael Baldassarre that some districts in the state are, in some cases, doing what could be perceived as thumbing their noses at the state — when it comes to spending to the mandated minimum on education — it's easy to ponder whether a new low is trying to be reached.

While there has been a recent track record where area school districts like Gardner or Winchendon spend practically to that minimum level, as spelled out most recently in the fiscal year 2010 compliance state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education numbers, other area districts at least tend to recognize the baseline number simply as a starting point. While Gardner in fiscal 2010 spent just \$95,557 above the \$25,079,113 minimum budget number, or a tad more than a third of one percent above the state mandate, or where Winchendon spent \$240,741 above the \$15,121,079 state baseline, or just 1.59 percent above it, other area districts did a good degree better by comparison.

For example, Athol-Royalston spent at 3.6 percent above the "required net school spending" number, while the Ashburnham-Westminster and Quabbin districts both ended up at 6.3 percent above it. Most notable, though, were Mahar and Narragansett, as Narragansett spent 9.76 percent above the mandated minimum, while Mahar stood at 22.16 percent above it.

For 2010, though, as noted by Mahar — and now Orange Elementary — superintendent Baldassarre, Orange became one of the few communities across the Bay State to not even cross that threshold.

Evidently, Orange wasn't the only city or town in Massachusetts to try to pull a fast one on state officials — as 22 school districts across the state chose to pay less than what is required by the state.

Among the 22 districts, though, many could at least try to argue that missing the mandated minimum was a result of a minor accounting error, as half of them ended up spending anywhere from 99.0 to 99.9 percent of what the state had set as a district's minimum.

In the case of Orange, though, while Baldassarre did initially try to push for a "level services" budget earlier in the year, it wasn't long before the district was like many in the northern Worcester County area in shoot-

ing for a lower budget number.

Even for a district that has seen its budget shrink in part because of its merging with Mahar, evidently meeting the state mandated minimum still is proving to be a challenge.

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ANDRES CAAMANO

The budget number for fiscal year 2012 to arrive at "level services," would have been \$5,580,110. Once that proved not to be feasible, the next budget number offered was \$5,385,037, only to learn that the town had reduced what it was going to spend on the district at \$5.037 million, or an almost \$350,000 difference.

No cutting back on pencils or reams of paper was going to close that gap.

And this is nothing new for a district that during fiscal 2010, was funded at \$240,170 below the state's legal minimum funding. Back then, the state mandate was \$7,191,890, while what was spent was \$6,951,810, amounting to just 96.7 percent of the

state minimum.

Only Northampton Smith (86.4 percent), Bristol County (95.5), Revere (95.7) and Springfield (96.3) funded their districts at a worse rate across the state.

Not exactly something to be proud of when you think of it.

Oddly enough, for the 22 districts that failed to at least hit the minimum, based on state regulations, virtually every single district will skirt any punishment for falling below the minimum. As long as a district funds at 95 percent or better of the mandated minimum — so much for a "mandate" — no punishment is handed down by the state on that district. Only Northampton Smith fell below that threshold — by \$364,450, or 13.6 percent of their mandated minimum — and will as a result be required to have that amount added to their minimum number next year.

In the case of Orange, the question then becomes what exactly could the \$240,170 that wasn't spent in fiscal 2010 have funded?

Baldassarre took a tour of the Orange schools recently and found a number of eye-opening examples of where those dollars could have helped.

For students in fifth-grade English, in an elementary school in Orange they are still using a series of textbooks from 1957. One could argue that the language hasn't changed much in

the last 54 years, but all one needs to know is how much a dictionary changes on an annual basis to know that simply isn't the case.

Even more disturbing is in a sixth-grade classroom in one of the district's schools, a 1986 social studies textbook is still being used as part of the curriculum.

As Baldassarre noted, "There was this guy Clinton who was president, and then another guy Hussein, and for those who might want to know how the Iraq War started ..."

It's obvious that when teaching history, having a 25-year gap in a textbook leaves a massive hole of missing information for a child, and therefore doesn't really provide a level playing field compared to those children in other districts who actually might have textbooks printed maybe even in the last decade or sooner.

Imagine that.

While Baldassarre did note that "most districts in the state are funded at around 20 percent more than the minimum," when looking statewide, upon adding up all the districts, he's at least in the overall ballpark, as the funding across the state is at 113.9 percent of the mandated minimum.

In this region, though, based on the 2010 numbers, Mahar could take pride in knowing that it was the only one to end up

spending above what ends up being the state average.

And even when accounting for the minimal difference spent by some districts between the mandated minimum and what they actually spend — as with Gardner and Winchendon, for example, at least their numbers ended up being on the positive side of the ledger, and not in the red.

For Baldassarre, it's clear he's got some work to do, as based on where Orange schools stand with regard to funding, it's not altogether surprising that for 337 districts across the state, 302 of them are better funded than Orange.

Which adds up to about \$3,000 more spent on the average Massachusetts student as well, compared to those in Orange.

In trying to somehow make the budget numbers work for the coming year, Baldassarre has been left to eliminate the elementary music, art and physical education programs, along with laying off 22 district employees. One wonders with such drastic cuts, if people will begin to notice that it just might be time to at least follow what the state requires, and fund the district to the mandated minimum.

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