

HELLO HINGHAM

THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

By Cathy Salisbury, Hingham League of Women Voters

In contrast to the broad powers of the Hingham Planning and Zoning Boards, the Hingham School Committee has a rather narrow scope of authority. The 1993 Education Reform Act established a comprehensive state regulatory system that the General Court (the State Senate and House of Representatives) hoped would result in greater consistency in education. The Act directed the Board of Education to establish guidelines to evaluate personnel, including teacher performance standards. Also, it encouraged public schools to develop programs and standards that include a tougher, comprehensive evaluation process.

The Hingham School Committee, under the Act, selects and terminates the superintendent of schools, reviews and approves budgets and establishes educational goals and policies consistent with the goals established by the state Board of Education.

The Act also mandated that school councils be created, consisting of a school principal, parents, teachers and other residents of the community. This gives citizens direct participation in setting educational goals. Each school district also has to prepare a three year comprehensive district plan, an annual district action plan, and an annual school improvement plan. Schools Superintendent Dr. Dorothy Galo and her staff prepare the three-year district improvement plan. The plan must:

- analyze student and sub-group achievement gaps in core subjects
- identify specific improvement objectives
- describe strategic initiatives to achieve improvement objectives and performance benchmarks, and how that will be done
- describe the professional development activities and the teacher mentoring activities that will support the district's improvement efforts.

Every September 1st a school district has to prepare an annual action plan which lists the specific activities, persons responsible and timelines to accomplish the strategic initiatives.

Each school principal prepares the individual annual school improvement plan, with the school council's ideas included. The plan establishes student performance goals, assesses the needs of the school, and formulates a school plan to accomplish this.

The school committee can request copies of these individual school plans to see if they are consistent with the three-year plan. However, the superintendent has final approval authority of all school improvement plans. Since the 1993 Act, cities and towns are required to appropriate from local revenues the minimum required contribution to their public schools.

A formula, set by statute and interpreted by the state Board of Education, determines a city or town's share in addition to state aid moneys given to each local school district.

The goal of the formula is to ensure minimum spending per pupil in each Massachusetts city or town. Hingham Town Meeting has always voted to support its school department budget that results in per pupil spending that exceeds the state minimum.

Town meeting voters by law are permitted to vote only on the total requested school department budget, unlike with other town departments. Voters have no ability to shape educational policy by granting or withholding funds for certain budget areas for our schools. The school committee does this.

Incidentally, the state Board of Education may withhold state and federal funds from school committees that fail to comply with laws relating to the operation of the public schools. It may also refer cases of non-compliance to the state Attorney General for appropriate action. The Board has the authority to establish a process for declaring a school or school district to be under-performing or chronically under-performing. The Board of Education publishes annual profiles of each public elementary and secondary school and school district in the Commonwealth. These profiles provide information concerning student achievement of performance goals, school spending, special programs, curriculum offerings and qualifications of teaching staff.

For information about membership in the Hingham League of Women Voters, please contact Christine Dietterich at ceod@verizon.com.