

CAMBRIDGE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

3

January 7, 2003

Ms. Marilyn Bradshaw
Secretary
Cambridge School Committee
456 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02138

To The Honorable Members of the School Committee:

During the last few School Committee meetings concerning the merger and consolidation of schools, School Committee members expressed concern that they had not heard from the professional educators in the district about what is best for the school system as a whole. I respectfully disagree with you on this matter. Although I have not surveyed and consulted all of my members individually on what would be the best solution to this complex problem, I began visiting schools, talking to my members about the merger and consolidations process in the fall of 2001. As the merger and consolidation process intensified and began to focus on specific schools, I visited those schools and talked with the staff and principals. I did this with each new variation of the plan. I have attended every School Committee meeting on the issue and delivered the concerns of my members to you and the Superintendent. In addition, I listened, along with you, to countless individual CTA members speaking on behalf of their schools and communities. Furthermore, Principals have met with their staff and communities and they have expressed their concerns as schools. The teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators and clerks have all had an opportunity to express themselves as individuals, as members of school groups, and through me, their union president. The one common concern that all of my members have is that of job security. They are also frustrated with the length and divisiveness of this process. However, it is painfully clear from these meetings and the public testimony that no one wants to see their school communities dissolved. But it is equally clear that no one has a recommendation that will satisfy every single constituency in Cambridge.

I want to reiterate some points that I have made in the past. The CTA membership understands the need for the School Committee to take action and make a decision to merge, consolidate and/or close schools. We have been awaiting your decision for more than a year now. We do not believe it is justifiable to have 2,000 empty seats or the huge disparity in class sizes across the school system. We agree that with the wealth of resources we have at our disposal we should not see the achievement gap that we witness today. We agree that we should be trying to improve the achievement levels of all children in the district. We further agree with Mayor Sullivan that it is unacceptable that students are leaving our elementary schools unprepared for high school. But this situation is not new. My members have known that these problems existed and we have been speaking out for many years. But apparently no one was listening. These problems have only come to the forefront of the public debate recently because the MCAS, President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (ESEA) and our budgetary problems have put a spotlight on these issues. The glass bubble that has protected Cambridge and allowed our leaders and the general public to ignore, or, at the very least tolerate, these inequitable results for so many years has been broken.

As President of the Cambridge Teachers Association, I disagree with the statements that have been made by some members of the School Committee that educators in academically lower performing schools are blaming the children for low test scores. Neither they nor I have ever blamed the children and have continuously supported our students and families academically, emotionally and, in many cases, financially. I am outraged by the inference that the poor test performance of these students is all the teachers' fault. Some of you have regularly asserted that if you just change the composition of the staff and insert a new program in the schools that are not meeting DOE and ESEA targets that suddenly, all will be well and these schools will suddenly flourish. I disagree with these assumptions. The CTA members in these schools have a population of students who face many challenges outside of school. These employees work just as hard, are just as highly qualified and have the same high level of expectations of their students as teachers in schools which perform better on standardized tests. But several of you consistently imply in your public comments that there are teachers in certain schools who are not meeting your personal standards of professionalism. I suggest that if you are aware of individuals in any school who are not fulfilling their contractual and professional duties, you bring it to the attention of their principals or supervisors privately rather than impugn an entire staff with your broad generalizations. The members of the Cambridge Teachers Association are not afraid of being held accountable for the things over which we have control.

There are two major issues that the City and the School Department face. The most important is addressing the achievement gap among our schools and students. The second are the budgetary, facilities and enrollment concerns. I will address both.

Several of you have emphasized that any plan that is proposed must address the achievement gap among our schools and students. The members of the Cambridge Teachers Association agree, but let us examine the origin of this achievement gap. We

have heard several times now from the Superintendent's leadership team that their assessments reveal that children in Cambridge are entering our public schools in kindergarten with significant differences in their level of preparedness for school. Some are entering school already reading and others are entering having never been read to. This initial achievement gap is the result of home environment. This has nothing to do with race or ethnicity, but everything to do with parental involvement and educational level. Parents and guardians truly are the primary educators of our students. Once in school, our teachers and classroom assistants attempt to address this gap and educate all children to the best of their ability.

Why does this gap between schools persist once the children enter our schools? I personally believe there are many reasons, including: the economic disparity of our student populations; the uneven distribution of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in our schools; the lack of district wide curriculum and assessment policies which leads to different learning expectations and standards of measurement in each of our elementary schools; and, our policy of social promotion which exacerbates the problem as children progress through the grades. These are my personal observations but they have been substantiated in many ways by the findings of the Spence Report, our annual student data reports, the work of Dr. Gary Orfield of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard and the work of Richard Kahlenberg. Why do all of the research and hire the experts if we never act upon their findings.

Now that the School Committee has decided to delay making a decision by several months, I am inviting my Executive Board and additional representatives from every school and department to participate in a CTA sponsored forum to discuss what we, the educational professionals who will have to implement your policy decisions, believe are the sources of the achievement gap and to consider and develop recommendations for improving the performance of our district as a whole. As educators, our primary concern is and has always been to foster the success of each and every one of our students. We look forward to working with the School Committee and the Superintendent for the betterment of the school system for all of our students and we hope you will take our future recommendations into consideration in your final decision.

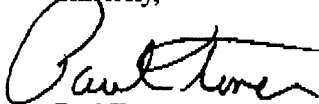
As a labor organization, we have other concerns around job security and maintaining a competitive benefits and salary package. We must face the coming budgetary shortfall and declining enrollment together. In fact, you need to make the decisions, but my members will have to suffer the consequences. For this reason, the CTA has and continues to urge the School Committee to do the following:

- Implement a hiring freeze in the coming school year.
- Offer an early retirement incentive/buyout to all Unit A and B staff.
- Assign all currently employed Unit A and B staff to classroom duties/direct student service positions.
- Eliminate the use of outside consultants in the coming budget year.
- Develop a long term plan for the school district so that we are not going through this process again in another year or two.
- Make a timely decision; do not extend your timeline past June of 2003.

We believe that through attrition, retirement and making more efficient use of current school department employees, we can downsize the school system without layoffs while also freeing up the necessary resources to provide your current employees with competitive salary increases in our upcoming negotiations.

As you and the Superintendent move forward in this process we hope that you will consider these options and our recommendations in the months ahead.

Sincerely,



Paul Toner,
President

CC: Superintendent D'Alessandro
Cambridge City Council
Robert Healy, City Manager

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Consent Communication #3

A communication was received from Paul Toner, President, Cambridge Teachers Association, regarding the merger and consolidation of schools.

In City Council January 13, 2003

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