



ALFRED E. VELLUCCI
MAYOR

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
MASSACHUSETTS

An Open Letter

From The Mayor

To The Superintendent of Schools

February 16, 1982

In our City, there is a unique group of very special parents. They have taken to worrying from daybreak to day's end. They are the parents of our school children with special needs.

According to the Superintendent's proposed budget, submitted to me on the evening of February 9, 1982, the day after my election as Mayor, these children and their parents are not so special at all. The Superintendent recommends a system wide budget cut of 10%, but for most programs which service our kids who are retarded, learning disabled or physically or emotionally handicapped, he recommends a cut of service that amount to a 20% reduction.

Let Mr. Lannon know this and let him know this well: these children have always been special to me, they are now and so they will always be. Anyone who in any way dares to tamper with their right to the special help which enables them to exercise their right to a proper education will have to walk over me first to do it!

I need no lectures from the Superintendent or his staff about the scarce and perilous times in which we all must live and work. As Chief Legislative Officer of the City, I oversee the entire municipal budget, of which the School budget is only part. I suspect I could teach Mr. Lannon a few lessons about the problems and opportunities of providing municipal services and public education during a period of shrinking dollars.

But I look at things in a different light. I have a history of being an elected official who has tried as best he could to help those who are most in need and who are least able to get by without public help.

I believe this as a fundamental truth to my politics: in an era of diminishing resources, those resources become ever more precious, and thus they must first go to those among us who are genuinely most needy and deserving. A normal child can still read and learn and develop in a classroom which has a few more pupils than we might ideally desire. But a dyslexic child or a retarded child ----- that is another case. Until their special afflictions are diagnosed and treated, these kids will stand still in any classroom, regardless of the size. In fact, the frustration of their predicament will set those kids back into an unnecessary spiral of frustration, fear, anxiety and loss of self-respect. I did not become the Mayor of Cambridge so as to stand idly by and bear witness to the devastation of young lives before they have even a chance to begin.

If we deny special educational help to kids with special problems and special needs, then in so doing we violate our public trust under Public Law 94-142 and effectively deny these children the right to any education at all.

Special education is the bridge that enable these children to find passage over the turbulence of their disability so that they might then join with other children whom nature and circumstance have placed already on safer and gentler ground. To these kids and their parents I make a pledge: I am the keeper of that bridge.

The City of Cambridge will not balance its books over the lives and futures of young children who are retarded or learning disabled or physically handicapped or emotionally disturbed. We are a better City than that.

The City has a long tradition of helping those who cannot fully and alone help themselves. The life and work of men like Edward Danehy, John D. Lynch, Michael Sullivan, Edward Sullivan, Henry Russell and John Clinton stand as testimony to that tradition. I am a part of that tradition and I stand humbly and proudly within it. Mr. Lannon is from another place and apparently another tradition so he does not appreciate or understand the history of the institution which he serves. It will take more than Proposition 2½ or this budget whimsy of an appointed official to undermine and undo the very heart and soul of the City of Cambridge. Each child is entitled to an education. For some that entitlement requires special help. For none will that entitlement be taken as anything less than sacred.

I was a man in my sixties before I received my high school diploma. Education is special to me.

So are these kids.

I'll say one final word which may help Mr. Lannon understand the sincerity of my feelings. For reasons that are mine alone, I have already taken these children with special needs to heart and in my own private way have "adopted" them as my own. I feel privileged as Mayor and Chairman of the School Committee to be in a position to act officially on their behalf. These children are then as my own children. If Superintendent Lannon still wants to do battle here, so be it. But he should be certain and know first where he treads, for this is how the battle lines shall be drawn. When the hope for a future for young children like these is at stake, well, I suspect I'm capable of just about anything.

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Comm. from Mayor Vellucci transmitting a copy
of an open letter from the Mayor to the Super-
intendent of Schools Re: the School Dept.
Budget.

In City Council,

February 22, 1982