

Richard Tannenbaum

Q. In recent years, the school district has annually proposed budget increases greater than inflation, and has actually proposed bond issues to finance regular spending (not new capital spending). What do you think of this approach to financial management?

A. Bonds, if issued at all, should only be issued for capital improvements, and never for operating expenses. The District has to manage its operating budget from taxes revenues, and state and federal funding.

Q. For many years, the Nyack school district has been operating with annual expense increases about doubling the rate of inflation. Do you consider this a problem? If so, what would you do about it?

A. Expense increases are largely mandated by contractual increases in union and administrative compensation (including health and retirement benefits), and state and federal mandates. The teachers' union contract expires in June of 2009 and the new board will begin negotiating with the union in earnest (and in secret) this fall. Teachers in this District are very well paid, have job security, and an excellent panoply of benefits for themselves and their dependents. Because the union holds the exclusive right to all teaching functions in the District, they also have numerous ways to earn extra money within the existing contract framework. We have 85 teachers earning over \$100,000 and some earning more than \$125,000 per year. Dozens more earn just under \$100,000. The last contract has been a boon for teachers and their union, and has been mostly responsible for increases in the annual tax levy. Since our teachers are so well compensated, the next contract should focus on the taxpaying community. Because of economic uncertainty and a dampening economy, the new board should hold the line on further increases for teachers. The new board should mandate that teachers contribute more toward their benefits and the benefits for their dependents. The new board should negotiate a change in the contract that permits the District to outsource some of the teaching functions to qualified professionals in the community. The new board should look at every co-curricular and extra-curricular stipend for both necessity and amount and restructure these compensation tables to reflect the community's ability to pay.

Regarding administrative salaries, the new board should hold the line on any increases. Our unpopular superintendent already earns about \$250,000. Numerous under-superintendents earn just under \$200,000 and numerous directors earn between \$150,000 and \$175,000. These salaries are already highly competitive (especially for the public sector) and if our administrators are unwilling to do their jobs at these compensation rates, they should be replaced.

The District also pays debt service every year (through 2021) on millions of dollars left over from the construction of the new high school from the 1980s. Rather than pay the debt off as promised in the original bond issue, the District rolled the debt forward and extended its term. The District should sell the Hilltop Administration facility. The property is largely leased to Nyack College at below market rents and by the time the District (taxpayers) pay all of Nyack College's utilities and repairs, the District barely breaks even. Some argue the lease is a taxpayer subsidy of a

private bible college. This property needs to be appraised and sold to a private developer so that the property can be put back on the tax rolls (Nyack College pays no property taxes). The money from the sale could be used to pay off the existing debt and eliminate some or all of the annual debt service of principal and interest. This could save taxpayers millions of dollars from the annual operating budget and provide genuine tax relief. Same is true for the BOCES property. BOCES pays no property taxes either. The building can be sold to a developer who could convert the building to condominiums. MacCalman Field could be kept. This sort of thing is happening all over New York State.

These are just some ideas to tackle the budget and related tax levies. The current system is not sustainable and until change comes from Albany or Washington, it is incumbent on the school board trustees to find innovative ways to control the budgets.

Q. With the known ongoing gang involvement in the middle and high schools of the nyack school district, what do you envision the part of the school board, administration, teachers and parents in the addressing of this issue.....other than budgetary concerns, as a resident of Nyack, I view this a major problem that needs be addressed and in an intelligent way.....a way that will show results and keep the community involved and have the school accept its responsibility as the "educator".....this a question to be addressed by all and hopefully is presented for reply and not just determined of no interest....the candidates must be asked and respond intelligently as the children in your care are our future....

A. The District has a responsibility to educate all of the students in the District including those that are on the margins, socially and economically. Students who fail in school and students who do not graduate have very little opportunity to obtain good jobs going forward and are more likely to turn to gangs and/or drugs. Nyack consistently comes in 6th or 7th of the 8 school districts in Rockland County in test scores for 3rd grade through 8th grade in both English Language Arts and Math. Of those students starting 9th grade, only about 81% of them will graduate high school in four years. (Some may stay on for a fifth or sixth year and some will eventually get a GED.) To give this perspective, if there are 200 students entering 9th grade every year, about 38 of them will not graduate four years later. Every year, we put around 38 students back in the community without diplomas and with limited opportunity. This year, New York is doing away with local diplomas and only New York State Regents diplomas can be issued. This will likely aggravate our already abysmal graduation rates. Before anything can be done, the District needs to recognize the problem. In my view, it has failed to do so and failed to take responsibility for these important issues. Until we re-allocate resources to tutor and help students on the margins, we are going to perpetuate the problem and put under-educated kids back on the street. This is not only a law enforcement issue. We have enough poor kids already in jail. It is a fundamental issue of education and opportunity for all. Let's face it, as wonderful as they are, the District is also made up of students other than those who star in Phantom of the Opera and the students who carry heavy AP loads.

Q. What do you consider to be more important- lower taxes or a better educational system? Choose only one, please.

A. This is the old guns versus butter question. It is not a real choice, both are issues of degree. I believe that we can have a better educational system with the budget and taxes currently collected. I believe our resources are not wisely utilized and that our finances and good will have been abused by a powerful union and well-paid administrators. I believe the District is wrongly in the real estate business and ties up vast resources to the community's detriment. I believe that we are not receiving the excellence we are paying for and that a re-allocation of resources would vastly improve our educational system without affecting taxes.

Q. Why do you want to be on the school board?

A. In my view, the community is not well-represented on the school board, and the existing board has lost its way. A school board trustee is a fiduciary to the community at-large and owes it two obligations: 1) to insure that the paid administration secures the best education possible for the student body; and 2) to insure that the community's funds are wisely spent in pursuit of the first goal.

The board has become a rubber stamp of District Administration policy. I have sat in on board meeting after board meeting where resolution after resolution is approved without meaningful discussion or even probing questions. I have seen resolutions passed in bulk without a single question being asked about the impact on the community or the budget. And, I have seen solid suggestions from the community ignored or ridiculed by members of the board.

I learned during the fight over the turf bond that the board was not open to new ideas and was suspicious of dissenters. I saw individuals maligned on web sites sponsored by members of the board and heard about individuals being ridiculed at community meetings, including meetings of the local chamber of commerce. I realized at that point that having seven persons on the board who all thought the same tired old thoughts did not make for a well functioning board.

There are several important opportunities coming up in the next year. The teachers' union contract expires in June of 2009 and negotiations on a new contract will begin this fall. I believe the existing board will not negotiate the contract with the community in mind and will give another round of generous increases to the union. These increases will mandate increases in the tax levy for years to come. If I am on the board, I will provide a seat at the bargaining table to the community. I met with representative of the teachers' union recently and told them that I thought they were all well-paid, had good job security and generous benefits. I told them that the next contract should be negotiated with the community's finances in mind. I did not receive the union's endorsement.

The Aramark food service contract is up for renewal this summer. The cafeteria food is awful – filled with added sugars and artificial chemicals and preservatives. Study after study shows that students who skip artificial sugars and chemicals in their meals are easier to teach and manage and learn more during the school day. The existing board will take the easy way out and renew the Aramark contract as it

exists. About 60 % of the student body have already abandoned or are boycotting the cafeteria lunches right now. Only 1200 of the 2950 students eat cafeteria food and of those 1200, a large number eat it because it is free or available at reduced prices. Districts all over the country are making material changes for the better in their lunch programs. We can do much better than we are. The existing Board has showed a lack of interest.

I am worried about our students, especially those on the margins and those that have a record of not meeting state expectations. With the loss of the “local” diploma, our abysmal graduation rates will likely get worse. I have not seen the Board take measures to help this segment of the community. Their parents may not vote and may not attend board meetings, but are still part of the community and have a fundamental right to the best education we can provide. I am tired of the Board and District citing “demographics” as the reason for the District’s failures. I want to represent the segments of the community that have historically been without a voice.

I believe I have the requisite passion and appropriate skills set for the Board, and I believe that as an independent thinker, I can provide new perspectives and opportunities to improve the School Board and School District.

Q. What new or changed initiatives would you support at the middle and high school level to combat gang activity, especially given recent events at Nyack High School and in the community.

A. I would start at the elementary schools. I believe that gang and drug activity are the by-product of a failing educational system. Students turn to gangs and drugs when they have no meaningful opportunities ahead of them. By the 3rd or 4th grade, the District knows pretty well which students are failing to meet academic expectations. It needs to dedicate its resources to helping these students achieve academic goals. Tutors and mentors need to be retained. The teachers’ contract limits the number of hours a teacher can be asked to work each day and the number of days (185) that a teacher can be asked to teach. For a substantial part of the student body, these contractual limits deprive students of the opportunity to learn. The teachers’ union needs to agree to give up its exclusive rights to all teaching functions in the District so that this particular function can be competitively outsourced.

As I said earlier, Nyack consistently comes in 6th or 7th of the 8 school districts in Rockland County in test scores for 3rd grade through 8th grade in both English Language Arts and Math. Of those students starting 9th grade, only about 81% of them will graduate high school in four years. (Some may stay on for a fifth or sixth year and some will eventually get a GED.) To give this perspective, if there are 200 students entering 9th grade every year, about 38 of them will not graduate four years later. Every year, we put around 38 students back in the community without diplomas and with limited opportunity. This year, New York is doing away with local diplomas and only New York State Regents diplomas can be issued. This will likely aggravate our already abysmal graduation rates.

Before anything can be done, the District needs to recognize the problem. In my view, it has failed to do so and failed to take responsibility for these important issues. Until we re-allocate resources to tutor and help students on the margins, we are going to perpetuate the problem and put under-educated kids back on the street. This is not only a law enforcement issue. We have enough poor kids already in jail. It is a fundamental issue of education and opportunity for all.

Q. What if any specific improvements would you advocate for on the elementary school level to better challenge and meet the needs of academically advanced students?

A. My daughter attends kindergarten at VCE. I am not an expert on elementary school initiatives for academically advanced students. Sometimes a child's level of advancement stems from their pre-school experience or their home environment. If the need for such initiatives were presented, I would be open to any of them that had proven track records and that were financially viable. I would also support academic initiatives for academically challenged elementary school students.

Q. Would you support another bond proposal to fund capital improvements in the school district? If so, what changes would you propose from the last bond proposal and how would you make the bond more palatable to voters?

A. I would not support another bond proposal to fund capital improvements in the school district. I believe the District has underutilized real estate assets (see previous answers) that it needs to tap in to before it asks tax payers to add to the District's already heavy debt load. We are still paying for the new high school from the 1980s and will continue to pay existing debt until 2021. Until the District uses its existing asset base effectively, I would vocally oppose new debt.

Q. Head Start is a great success. It helps even the playing field for all children. Do you see evening the playing field for all children as a priority in our schools? If so, how do you think we can help the schools better achieve this?

A. I've written in my previous answers that I believe the District owes an affirmative obligation to do better by those students on the margins and those that are failing to meet objective expectations. (Please see my answers above.) There needs to be a District-wide commitment to this principle – but there isn't one. Some candidates think that the answer to academic problems is in sports fields, particularly artificial turf sports fields. Others believe that everything is fine as it is – that we are paying for and getting the best education available anywhere. I believe the answer lies in mentors and tutors and an expansion of the school year beyond the 185 days permitted by the Nyack Teachers' Union. (Again, see my answers above.) Before change can occur, there must be recognition of the underlying problem. This is a very diverse community, especially economically. Everyone has a fundamental right to the best education we can provide.

Q. How do you see the School Board interacting with the Schools' Superintendent?

A. I believe that a District Superintendent should be a high-functioning, well-trained and skilled professional that can deliver high quality education to a community, while at the same time recognizing the needs and limitations of the community. The Board's role is to insure that the person it selected as Superintendent meets those expectations and when that person fails to meet those expectations, to inform and advise that person on their failings.

This Board has been too deferential to the Superintendent and has not recognized her failings. The Board should not permit the Superintendent to spin statistics to give the appearance that the District is providing the best education available when it is not, nor should it sit quietly while she does so. The Board should be challenging the Superintendent constantly to do better (and not with financial incentives, she is already well compensated). The Board's job is to honestly report to the community what is going on in the District and how actions taken by the Board (at the behest of the Superintendent) affect the community.

Q. What is your position on the effectiveness of school uniforms in promoting a more disciplined student body, and in leveling the playing field in a district with such broad range of incomes.

A. I oppose this sort of mandate, but welcome any parent who wants to uniform their child to do so.

Q. I've heard that over 75% of the annual budget is devoted to staff and administrative costs. That doesn't leave a lot of room for new programs without significant tax increases.

a) Do you have any ideas about decreasing costs without hurting educational programs?

I think the amount is probably closer to 80%. Here is what I've already said (above):

Expense increases are largely mandated by contractual increases in union and administrative compensation (including health and retirement benefits), and state and federal mandates. The teachers' union contract expires in June of 2009 and the new board will begin negotiating with the union in earnest (and in secret) this fall. Teachers in this District are very well paid, have job security, and an excellent panoply of benefits for themselves and their dependents. Because the union holds the exclusive right to all teaching functions in the District, they also have numerous ways to earn extra money within the existing contract framework. We have 85 teachers earning over \$100,000 and some earning more than \$125,000 per year. Dozens more earn just under \$100,000. The last contract has been a boon for teachers and their union, and has been mostly responsible for increases in the annual tax levy. Since our teachers are so well compensated, the next contract should focus on the taxpaying community. Because of economic uncertainty and a dampening economy, the new board should hold the line on further increases for teachers. The new board should mandate that teachers contribute more toward their benefits and the benefits for their dependents. The new board should negotiate a change in the contract that permits the District to outsource some of the teaching functions to qualified professionals in the community. The new board

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Both the administration and teachers' union want their salaries and raises compared to other Districts in Rockland and Westchester. However, when asked about graduation rates and performance on academic tests, they want to be compared to "similarly situated schools" elsewhere in the state, especially in remote rural upstate towns.

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b) Would you support formation of a committee, composed of business leaders with an accounting background, to examine best practices in other districts for making recommendations on how Nyack can maintain high educational standards while reducing overhead costs?

Yes, but I would not limit membership to persons with accounting backgrounds. There are already a lot of great ideas out there about pooling resources and obligations with other districts and municipalities to achieve discounts, buying power, and greater economies of scale. We have until now largely left the business function of the District in the hands of one person – our under-superintendent for business. She can not possibly be an expert in everything.