



CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

May 16, 2013

Donna P. Lopez
Interim City Clerk
City Hall
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dear Ms. Lopez:

Please place the enclosed letter on Communications and Reports for City Officers.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Leland Cheung
Craig Kelley
Kenneth E. Reeves
E. Denise Simmons



CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

May 16, 2013

Mayor Henrietta Davis
795 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dear Mayor Davis:

With only three of all nine Councillors voting in favor of the Cambridge School Department budget on Thursday, it is clear that there is a heightened level of frustration and angst amongst the Council – one that should not go unnoticed. The principal duty of the Cambridge City Council is to exercise fiduciary control over the City of Cambridge to ensure that it is meeting and exceeding the goals set by the Council each session. As adopted in December of 2011, one of our principal goals is to “strengthen and support human services, **public education**, and out of school learning in Cambridge for the benefit of residents of all ages”. On May 9, the will of the Council showed that questions and concerns remain as to whether the budget makes significant strides towards meeting this integral goal.

Many citizens throughout the City share this concern. In each of the last three Citizen Satisfaction Surveys, the quality of our public schools has been the top ranking concern amongst all Cambridge residents. It is crucial that all elected and appointed officials understand the importance of addressing the concerns that our community has expressed and that many Councillors raised in regard to the budget as it was presented at the May 9 Finance Committee meeting. We recognize that the wealth of concerns that were raised at this point may not be met in the next year, much less be solved during this current budget discussion, but it is important for the District to acknowledge that these concerns are real and that the District, coordinating with Cambridge’s elected officials and relevant City staff, will address them and develop a comprehensive, data-driven and outcomes-oriented long term plan to work towards accomplishing them in the years to come.

In particular, we think the District must make a clear and focused effort in these areas:

1. Research has time and time again demonstrated that youngsters who participate in a high-quality preschool program demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement, more socially responsible behavior, and make significantly higher earnings as an adult. We must invest in early childhood education to ensure that each and every child in Cambridge has the opportunity to attend preschool, and the current budget should more clearly explain how CPSD is supporting this notion now and how that support will be continued in the future. If the budget

does not address this concern, it is not in line with the Council's goal of strengthening public education.

2. Throughout discussions about CPSD with current, former, and prospective families, classroom management, school climate and teacher training are consistently recurring issues, as is supported by past CPSD parent surveys. We would like to see a budget that sets clear goals for teacher training as it relates to classroom management and school climate, along with associated data about student disciplinary issues. We understand that the CPSD budget cannot include every effort that the District is making, but it is important that the budget reflect the attempts made to address major concerns raised by the families it has been created to serve. A failure to assess these issues in the current budget is not in line with the Council's goal of strengthening public education.
3. Family engagement has been another important issue that the FY2014 School Department budget appears to overlook. The Family Liaisons play critical roles in ensuring that parents have a steady guide through all school-related issues and concerns, and they are tireless advocates for the children they work with, often going above and beyond their job descriptions to ensure that our kids get the very best educational experience possible. Study after study has shown that children do better at school when there is an active partnership with the parents and the families, yet the money devoted to Family Liaisons and the family engagement process is nowhere as robust as it needs to be. A failure to assess this great need in the current budget is not in line with the Council's goal of strengthening public education.
4. Understanding why students and families opt to leave the District, whether it be to attend a charter school, private school, or school in another district, is crucial for schools to improve. At present, the City spends approximately 9-11 million dollars annually, depending on state reimbursement formulas, on charter schools and a significant proportion of school-aged residents opt not to attend Cambridge public schools. Making an aggressive attempt to understand what educational needs that families perceive CPSD as not well-equipped to meet seems like a logical first step in figuring out how to address these concerns. If we do not address the concerns of residents who ultimately decide to send their children to academic institutions outside of CPSD, the Council is not furthering its goal of strengthening public education in the City of Cambridge.
5. The Council has committed to an extensive school building upgrade project that will add a quarter of a billion dollars to our City's debt load, a figure that will bring our total debt load beyond the level at which we have traditionally set the limit. Additionally, we've discussed the potential of extended day, expanded pre-k, eventually expanding the wrap around program, giving computers to kids, broader world language offerings, an office of college success, and other potentially large programmatic expenditures which are not accounted for in the long-term budgetary plan. While we are fully in support of investing in programs and facilities to give our students and staff the facilities they need to grow and thrive, we need a more comprehensive long-term picture to make informed decisions about expenditures that will ultimately be reflected in higher taxes for

- our residents. We also need to understand the trade-offs and considerations that go in to thinking about how these programs and facilities will increase our return on investment, given that Cambridge already has one of the highest per pupil costs in the state. The failure of the budget to address this concern is not in line with the Council's goal of "[evaluating] City expenditures with a view of maintaining a strong fiscal position and awareness of the impact on taxpayers while providing a high quality array of city services".
6. There is a concern that the population growth may not keep pace with the amount of building renovation called for in the proposed school budget. It would be most unfortunate if, after a decade of renovations, the City has four state-of-the-art school buildings with precious few students to occupy them. This is why it is important that we have at least a five-year projection for the Innovation Agenda. We would be much better served if we have a sense of how much this will cost going forward, if we can anticipate what additional expenses may need to be called for, what additional positions may be created that will need funding, how many students will be expected to be housed in these buildings, and so forth. The failure of the budget to address this concern is not in line with the Council's goal of "[evaluating] City expenditures with a view of maintaining a strong fiscal position and awareness of the impact on taxpayers while providing a high quality array of city services".
 7. Why, in a District that is very multi-cultural, do so many events, activities, programs and awards seem to be demographically disparate? The systemic inequities and racial unbalances that continue to exist between student populations strongly impact the ability of all of our children to reach their full potential. Failure to address this concern is not in line with the Council's goal to "value and support the racial, socio-economic, cultural and religious diversity of our city".

Given the scope of the \$150,000,000 CPSD budget, along with the roughly 22 million dollars in charter school payments and school construction debt service, it is clear to us that not all of our concerns will be able to be met immediately. We would like a clear commitment from the School Committee and CPSD staff that the next budget year will start with a focused discussion with the City Council and City staff of the above-listed concerns, and that measurable steps will be taken to ensure that additional concerns of families, students, and members of the community are addressed as well. If we can get that clear commitment, we would be willing to support this year's CPSD budget and work with all concerned parties to make sure future budgets better reflect the fiscal and educational concerns of the City.

Several years ago, we initiated the practice of holding City Council-School Committee Roundtables to increase the amount of communication between these two bodies, in the hopes of avoiding the very situation in which we now find ourselves. It would appear that we either need to increase the number of Roundtables we hold each year, or we need to set aside specific Roundtables each year to devote exclusively to discussing drafting the school budget, to ensure that City Councillors are able to publicly provide feedback as a group and air concerns during the budget drafting process.

Please feel free to contact us directly should you have any questions or concerns about this communication.

Sincerely,

Councillor Leland Cheung
Councillor Craig Kelley
Councillor Kenneth E. Reeves
Vice Mayor E. Denise Simmons

Cc:

Councillor Marjorie Decker, Finance Committee Chair
City Council
School Committee
Superintendent Jeff Young
City Manager Bob Healy
Deputy City Manager Richard Rossi