

Don't Call It a Raise

By Michael J. Atwood

Superintendent of Schools, Rick Smith stood before the RTM last week and asked for \$525,000 to supplement teacher raises. They said no.

The RTM decisively rejected the proposal, ignoring a 34-year public educator's professional opinion. To add salt to the wound, one member had the nerve to say "taxpayers were not getting raises" during this tough economic time. Originally, the amount of the proposed was \$900,000 but, the soon-to-be retired Smith, lowered the amount. His hope was that the RTM might give back to the town's educators. They still refused.

I believe the problem is diction here. It's no secret that North Attleborough teachers are underpaid and therefore, the term "raise" is a misnomer. This is an attempt to create a balance since we are \$2000 behind the average salaries in Attleboro and Wrentham. Some teachers may call that a mortgage payment; others might see it as day care costs so they can go teach our kids. But don't call it a raise. N.A. is behind and the RTM is misinformed.

I could list more statistics and area teacher salary comparisons. I could tell you that North teachers would be better off moving to districts closer to Boston. Instead, I'll share my story.

I'm a teacher but I don't teach in North Attleboro. My wife is a teacher too. She also does not teach in North Attleboro. Instead, we both opt to commute to nearby towns for one reason: our salaries are higher.

Sure, we'd love to teach in North Attleborough; I've even inquired in the past. Back in June '04, I contacted Superintendent Smith from California as I was preparing to move back east. At that time, he stated he didn't have any openings and that he hoped he wouldn't have to cut any jobs. Later, I spoke with the high school about a possible English position but the truth was, North Attleborough couldn't hire me at the same step that other districts in the Hockomock League could. I had earned a Master's degree and had ten years under my belt but N.A. still couldn't match the salary that I had been offered. Why?

It seems like we are a booming town with plenty of industry and tax revenue coming in. Just drive down Route 1 past the mob of shoppers at Target, Best Buy, Lowes, and Wal-Mart. Notice the cars in the parking lots of Pub 99, Fridays, Applebee's, and the Emerald Square Mall. People are still investing money in our town. So why didn't the RTM do the same with our teachers?

Instead, the RTM voted to forward \$3300 to cover up gravestones and \$5000 to repair historical chimneys. Are these items more important than the flesh and blood, who teach our children?

Anyone who knows a teacher is aware that they've survived on meager salaries, drive banged-up used cars, and work during the summer as house painters and camp counselors at the Y.M.C.A.. Sure, maybe with some seniority and a Master's degree, they can stay in the classroom and make a living, maybe even get a mortgage. The insulting part of it all is that \$525,000 divided among 300 plus educators in North Attleborough is about \$1600 a year on our average teacher salary. This would be close to the amount of government incentive checks for a family of four.

I spoke with Selectman Paul Belham after my article on the reform in N.A.'s town government. One thing he mentioned was the futility of the RTM. I tried to reserve judgement but he pointed out the lack of understanding and participation of new members and vacant seats in some districts. After last week's decision, I am beginning to agree with Mr. Belham.

Another person who should be standing up for teachers is town administrator, Mark Fisher. He, of all people, knows what teachers go through, having members of his family in the education business. Sure, we'll have enough in the budget to keep the furnace running at town hall but a 3.5% raise could fill a few educator's oil tanks this winter. If I was a teacher in N.A., I'd feel a real sense of discouragement.

Many educators have invested themselves in our schools and kids. They've taught here for years while their friends have consistently made more money. They've instead accepted a vocation to teach, coach, and mentor the youth of this town for salaries no higher than some associates at Blockbuster.

This issue is more personal than ever. I have a five-year old son who depends desperately on his teachers every day at the Early Learning Center. They have invested their education, training, and professionalism in him and deserve to be compensated properly for it. They don't need to hear differently from the RTM.