

Small New England Town Cuts School Board Budget—in Half

The annual Town Meeting in Croydon, New Hampshire took place on Saturday, March 12. Home to about 800 people, Croydon is a quiet town, and the meeting was likewise a quiet meeting. About 40 people were in attendance to vote on the town budget.

One of the main topics of discussion was the proposed \$1.7 million budget for the Croydon School Board. This [would cover](#) the 24 students in the Croydon Village School, a K-4 one room schoolhouse, and about 53 older students who are tuitioned out to public and private schools in the area. The \$1.7 million budget represented an increase of [about 30 percent](#) over the last three years, and would have come with an estimated property tax increase of [nearly 19 percent](#).

The chair of the school board, Jody Underwood, gave a presentation during the meeting explaining the budget so that people could understand what they were voting on. But right after her presentation, Ian Underwood, her husband, did something daring. He [made a motion](#) from the floor to reduce the budget to \$800,000, a 53 percent cut.

Ian's motion was not unplanned. Earlier in the meeting, he had handed out a pamphlet explaining what he intended to do and his rationale behind the proposal. Jody was aware of his plan, but was [not involved](#).

"What we're being asked to vote on today isn't a budget," Ian wrote in the [pamphlet](#), entitled *Budget, or Ransom?*. "I propose that we amend the amount in Article 2 to reflect a budget—that is, the amount that the voters in the district want to pay—rather than a ransom—that is, the amount that district officials feel like demanding."

He then cited sources showing that education expenditures

don't correlate with academic performance, making the case that "in a very real sense, it doesn't matter *what* we choose to spend." Readers were asked to step back and consider what level of funding would make sense on a per-student basis.

To provide a baseline, he noted that the state gives charter schools less than \$8,000 per student, and two nearby private schools charge less than \$9,000 per student. Based on these numbers, he reasoned that \$10,000 per student should be sufficient. With about 80 students enrolled, that makes for a budget of \$800,000. By comparison, the original \$1.7 million budget would have provided funding equivalent to \$21,000 per student.

"There are a lot of fundamental questions that never get serious consideration under the ransom-based model of school funding," Underwood [writes](#). "The point of putting them on a budget is to force them to find ways to use an entirely reasonable amount of money to accomplish, not what parents would like, but what all of us need."

Underwood's proposal may sound reasonable or downright crazy, depending on your perspective. Suffice it to say, many of the people in attendance were convinced, and the motion passed 20 to 14.

By Monday, the town was far from quiet.

"The Croydon School Board got an earful Monday evening as about 75 people turned out to oppose what 20 town voters had approved days earlier," Valley News [reports](#). "School board members Jody Underwood, Aaron McKeon and Kevin Morris faced a withering onslaught for more than three hours as residents questioned how the school was expected to operate on less than half of its proposed budget."

"I'm ashamed and disgusted by this reckless budget that was

proposed by your husband,” Angi Beaulieu, a former school board member, told Jody Underwood.

In the wake of these events, a petition was created to have a new vote on the \$1.7 million proposal, since the cut was done so suddenly and by so few people. The petition was successful and the new vote is scheduled for [May 7](#). However, to even have the vote, at least half of the 565 registered voters need to show up, a high bar for local elections.

Naturally, the board is looking for creative ways to provide education with such a radically reduced budget. “The current model that we’re looking at,” [said](#) Jody Underwood, “which seems to be the only viable model under the \$800,000 budget, is to go to micro-schools. They’re just so much cheaper than the public school options.” She also mentioned that micro-schools provide more choice and that teacher evaluations of the micro-school model have been very positive in recent years.

Though the debate in Croydon may seem small, it draws attention to a large issue, which is the growing inefficiency and administrative bloat that has crept into school systems across the country. School budgets have been skyrocketing, yet schools have little to show for it.


Now, if there was free-market competition in education, schools could easily be held accountable for their spending decisions, because schools that spend money poorly would quickly go out of business as parents and students take their money elsewhere. But since [public schools](#) get money no matter how efficiently (or inefficiently) they are run, the competition mechanism can’t function properly.

As a result, the only way to hold public schools accountable is to rein in their budgets. Of course, it’s possible that this will lead to a lower quality education, but that certainly isn’t the goal. The goal is to foster accountability

and efficiency in an institution that so often lacks these attributes. Indeed, a lower budget may even make for a better education, because there is less bureaucracy getting in the way.

Time will tell whether Croydon's experiment in radical budget cutting is successful. If it is, it may only be a matter of time before other towns follow Croydon's lead.

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