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Article Series

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Adequate is not enough

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For the Fall River Chamber Education Committee

This is third in a series about the current struggle to fund our public schools. Earlier columns this week described the legal requirement of “minimum school funding” and then what “level services funding” means. Today’s apocryphal tale considers how a bare bones budget is not merely a concept, but instead affects individual students in ways that may not show up for years.

This is a fable about a community not far in the future. Budget struggles made the community leadership choose to provide the legal minimum of school funding, defined as a provision for “adequate education.” It was nobody’s fault, and nobody made the decision out of ill will. Still, it meant a lot of shaking heads, sad faces, and promises to make it better as the economy got better.

But the decision affects more than just a system. It means reduced resources for a child who only gets one shot at kindergarten, or third grade, or tenth grade.



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Meet Max. Max is in first grade. He's a quiet, well-behaved child who enjoys race cars and puzzles.

Max loves his teacher, Ms. Mello. But an "adequate" budget means no aide in her class, so she is alone in a classroom of 35. She loves Max and all of her students, but her attention is directed to the louder, more raucous children who clearly show delays.

When Max opens a book, he sits there quietly, waiting for the words on the page to mean something. He struggles to sound words out in his head and is too embarrassed to practice aloud. The quiet student says nothing about his struggles and his teacher is stretched far too thin to provide Max with the one-on-one attention he needs. By sixth grade, Max, a once curious well-behaved boy, gives up. He is now three full years behind in reading and is suffering in history, science, and math. To avoid the snickers of other classmates when he struggles, he lashes out – throwing chairs, screaming, and becoming a danger to his peers, teacher and himself. By Christmas Max is suspended three times. At sixteen years old, Max walks out of his high school, and never returns.

Maybe he would have dropped out anyway, but what could his future have looked like if he received help learning to read in the first grade?

Then there is Karly, a third grader. She is energetic and charming – moving and doing things with her hands helped her stay focused on her learning. She looks forward



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to her favorite classes, art and music, every week, and she often draws pictures to illustrate some of the stories she reads and makes up silly songs to remember her science. She loves painting and working with clay, and in music she catches on to music theory and volunteers for solos. Those favorite classes keep her on track in her academics. In fact, she is great in math, which is common with students who study music. But an “adequate” budget means that one year art is cut from her school, and the next year she loses music. By the time she is in high school, her flashes of brilliance in math fade away, and she is failing three academic subjects.

There are many reasons girls may lose their interest in math by high school, but what could have happened if she had been exposed to the richness of the arts throughout her education?

This fable uses examples of what other schools have done to address budget shortfalls – not necessarily what our communities will do. But here’s the point – the bare minimum in funding leaves individual children behind in ways we won’t see for years. As Max’s mother, you would want that aide in the classroom. As Karly’s dad, you would fight for her chance to keep her favorite subjects.

Demanding more than “adequate” benefits hundreds of Maxs and Karlys – as well as your own child. Each child only gets one shot at a great education. It’s time to step up and demand more than adequate.



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What can you do? Currently the Fall River School Committee is considering a 2016-17 budget that meets only the legal state minimum of funding per student. The state aid currently proposed will unlikely increase for urban school systems.

Tell the Fall River City Council and School Committee that the legal minimum is not adequate. The time to act is now.