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Article Series

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Public education is the foundation of our democracy. It builds responsible, informed, and productive citizens. Public schools prepare our children to be highly skilled and efficient workers, producers, and thinkers for our future economy. Public education is also an essential public service paid for by local taxes that typically represents the greatest portion of any town's annual budget. The quality of a school system is one of the most cited reasons that residents choose a particular city or town in which to live.

The Town of Somerset has a rich history and its schools have received unwavering support from its community for many years. The officials and residents of Berkley recognized the quality of the Somerset school system over 30 years ago when they signed a tuition agreement for their high school students and again just 5 years ago when they voted to regionalize.

Both Somerset Public Schools (K-8) and the new Somerset Berkley Regional High School continue to be recognized for excellence. In June 2013 Somerset was named one of the Ten Best Communities for Raising Kids in Massachusetts along with communities like Longmeadow, Brookline, Lexington and Needham. Somerset also ranked 9th out of 10 ahead of Milton in recognition of its new state of the art high school (perhaps the most technologically advanced in Massachusetts) and the fact that an impressive 93% of its graduates went on to two- or four-year colleges. Somerset Berkley Regional is one of only a few Level 1 high schools in the SouthCoast and its students continue to score extremely well on MCAS and Advanced Placement exams.

This continued success can be attributed to the dedication of its faculty and staff, the leadership of its administration, the commitment of its students and their families, and the continued support of the taxpayers who recognize the importance of maintaining an exemplary school system.

In recent years, Somerset has been challenged by the close of Montaup Electric and the impending closure of Brayton Point Station, which continue to place additional burdens on residential tax payers. With the new reality of diminished corporate tax revenue, some might look to the school to simply cut back their programs and budgets. But simply cutting budgets is not the best way to address the issue, especially when it means putting at risk its most valuable resource, the quality of its school district.

A better approach would be to take an in-depth, strategic look at current programs and budgets, identify priorities and re-align current resources to fund those priorities and then take a proactive approach to seeking additional funding sources.

By regionalizing at the high school level, both communities have benefitted from additional revenue in the form of \$856,427 in Regional Transportation Aid and \$135,700 in Regional Bonus Grants. Since 2011, these additional funding sources have shifted the cost of education away from the taxpayers in Somerset to the tune of \$992,127. Additionally, generous corporate donations and grants during the past year enabled the District to train their faculty on the high school's new state-of-the-art technology even before the doors opened this past September. These examples of public/private partnerships and new funding sources illustrate how school districts can supplement local funding to maintain current levels of service and expand in important areas.

Recently the Somerset K-8 School District faced an +\$800K structural deficit in its FY15 Budget, following two consecutive years of deficits. The FY15 budget shortfall can be attributed to several key areas, including increased transportation costs, rising out-of-district special education tuitions and related medical services, and budget building and projecting practices that were far from ideal. A new administration has addressed these problems, made significant sacrifices this year to balance its budget, and is developing an FY16 budget that will propel Somerset Public Schools to become one of the best school districts in Massachusetts.

Our greatest commodity is our children and preparing them for the future is our greatest responsibility. Somerset Public Schools and Somerset Berkley Regional High will begin developing a comprehensive STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) program so that students learn the skills they will need to succeed in a global marketplace. All students must learn to collaborate while becoming creative, independent, and critical thinkers. They must learn to solve problems effectively, to communicate well in a variety of ways, and to use technology as a vehicle to collaborate and express their creativity. We need to create a population of graduates who thrive on curiosity, innovation, and inquiry.

The cost of ignorance far exceeds the cost of educating our children. In order to secure the future of Somerset, Berkley and the region, we must continue to invest in public education. Not only does a well educated population reduce costs to taxpayers by having fewer people rely on government subsidies, it also creates a larger tax base with higher salaries compared to a less-educated population. Somerset must maintain its excellence in education with the continued support of our great community.

About EdUp

The EdUp Campaign is a production of the Education Committee of the Fall River Area Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Inc. EdUp strives to grow individual and community aspirations through a sustained and multidimensional outreach to students, parents, and other stakeholders throughout the Greater Fall River Area, and by demonstrating the power of education to change the future of the region and each of our roles in it. For more information about the Chamber and the Education Committee, please visit www.FallRiverChamber.com or call 508-676-8226.