

September 29, 2013

Dr. Lawrence W. Gray
323 Hatchville Road
East Falmouth, MA 02536

Ms. Joyce Hussein, Chair
Stoughton School Committee
84 Pleasant Street
Stoughton, MA 02072

Dear Ms. Hussein:

I am writing to you regarding the recent School Committee (SC) decision to withhold payment of earned steps from teacher's pay. I am writing to you directly because it is my understanding that the SC negotiates with the Stoughton Teacher's Association (STA) and makes the decisions regarding those negotiations.

I was surprised when the same action was taken during the prior contract negotiation. I thought then that withholding steps was an unethical and potentially destructive way to treat our teaching staff. I should have spoken up at the time, but did not do so. I am writing to you because most teachers are reluctant to speak up, as indicated in the District Report—someone needs to speak up for them.

I recently polled members of our regional technology director's group. None of them had ever worked in a district where earned steps were withheld as a part of contract negotiations. I also asked several superintendents and former superintendents if they thought withholding steps was an appropriate action to take as part of contract negotiations. All of them thought this action to be inappropriate and potentially damaging to the relationship between the teacher's association and the district administration.

The district's dysfunctional relationship with the STA is a significant subject in the recent District Review Report. An improvement in this relationship is the first recommendation in the list of recommendations contained in the report. The district administration has apparently chosen to ignore this recommendation, as it is very difficult to understand how withholding payment of earned steps will result in an improved relationship with members of the STA.

The District Report, Appendix C, contained a summary of the 78 classroom observations conducted as part of the review process. The overall results of these observations were generally poor, as shown in the following summary of the observation data contained in the report.

	ELEM	OMS	SHS
Learning Environment	90.0 A-	80.4 B-	58.6 F
Teaching	68.9 D+	42.6 F	56.7 F
Learning	51.3 F	38.9 F	39.6 F
<hr/> <hr/> Overall Average Letter Grade	69.2 D+	52.4 F	51.5 F

These generally low scores, particularly in the Teaching and Learning categories, are a fundamental contributor to the district’s mediocre performance on state assessments. The low observation scores are a clear indication of the need for the district administration to work **with** the district teaching staff to improve classroom teaching within the district.

The district’s performance on state assessments has been relatively mediocre, as shown in the table below. (District Review, January, 2013, page 3).

School	Percentile Rank in MA
Stoughton High School	43
O’Donnell Middle School	55
Dawe Elementary	54
Gibbons Elementary	40
Hansen Elementary	53
South Elementary	50
West Elementary	16

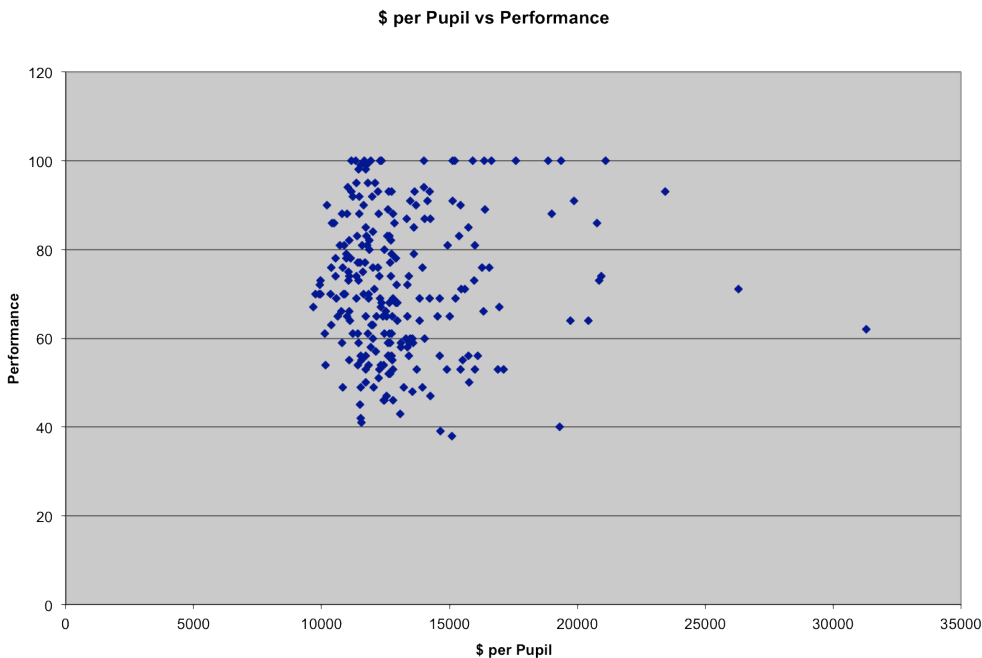
The district administration often chooses to lay blame for this mediocre performance on the general socio-economic conditions in Stoughton, the diversity of the school population, and perceived lack of funding for the district. There are numerous sources of data that illustrate that this belief is not supported by the significant level of research data available or by readily available state data.

A meta-analysis of approximately 400 studies of the relationship between school resources and student performance concludes:

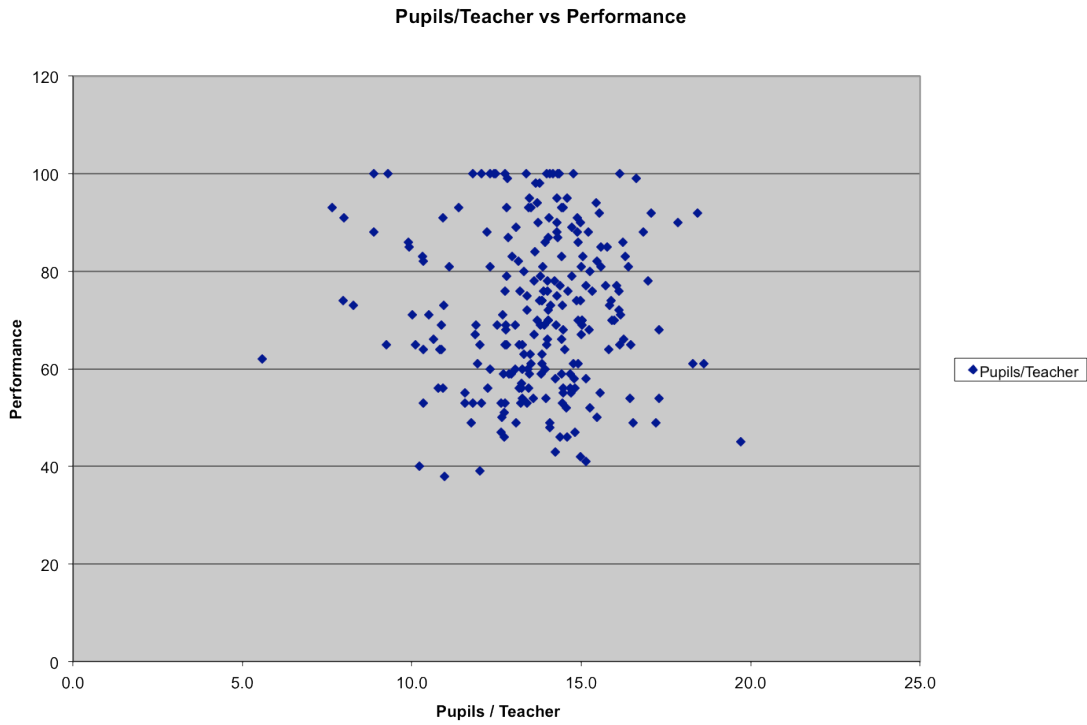
*“These results have a simple interpretation: **There is no strong or consistent relationship between school resources and student performance. In other words, there is little reason to be confident that simply adding more resources to schools as currently constituted will yield performance gains among students.**” (Hanushek, “Assessing the Effects of School Resources on Student Performance: An Update”).*

There is a local example that provides some level of empirical evidence that resources have little impact on student achievement. The Sturgis Charter Public School in Barnstable is housed in an old furniture store. It has no cafeteria, no gymnasium and minimal technology—virtually no resources at all other than teachers. Students are chosen by lottery—not by academic performance. It is the one of the highest performing high schools in the state. The school opened a second site because it had 600 students on a waiting list. With the second school open, there are still about 500 students on the waiting list. The level of student achievement at Sturgis demonstrates that a lack of resources has little or no effect on student achievement.

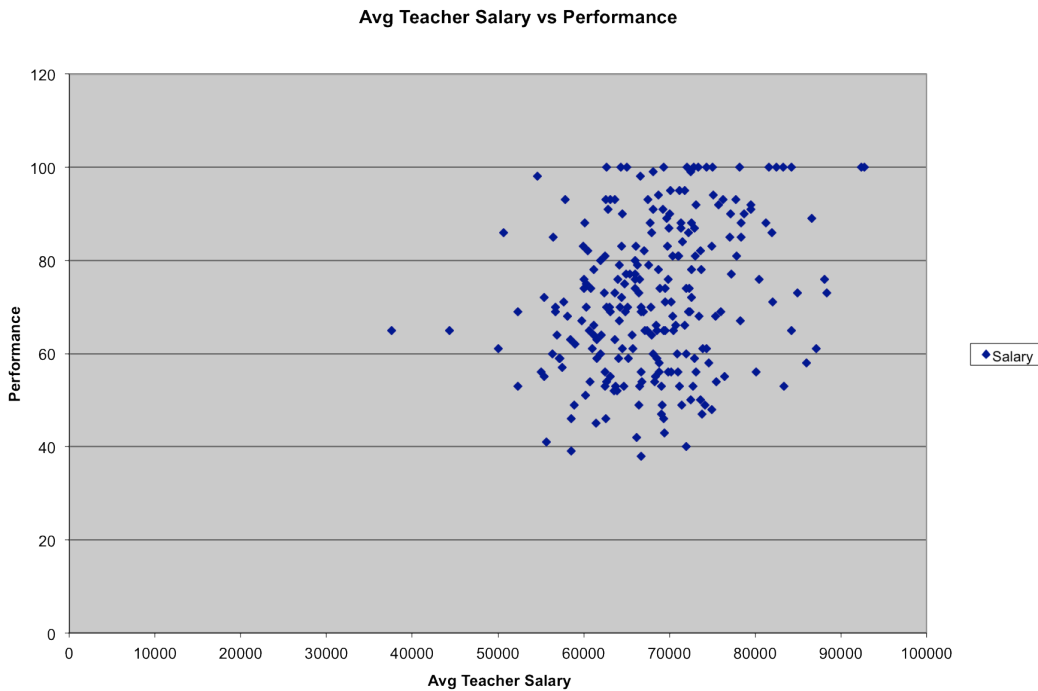
Recent aggregate data from Massachusetts’s school districts also illustrates the lack of impact of additional resources on student achievement. The data shown in the following graphics is taken from the Massachusetts DESE web site for the 2011-2012 school year. The first graphic shows spending per pupil versus district percentile rank in Massachusetts. Note the lack of a significant relationship between spending per pupil and district percentile rank. There actually appears to be a slightly negative relationship between spending per pupil and district percentile rank.



Similarly, note the lack of a significant relationship between student-teacher ratio and district percentile rank in the following graphic.



Interestingly, there is a positive relationship between teacher salary and district percentile rank, as shown in the following graphic.



Based on the results from a significant body of research, an examination of aggregate

data from school districts across the state, and local empirical evidence, it is unlikely that a lack of resources in the district has had a significant impact on student achievement.

However, there are substantial differences in student achievement between schools and teachers that are **not** related to resources. High performing teachers are responsible for significant increases in student achievement:

*“The clearest evidence comes from a series of covariance, or fixed-effects, estimates of performance differences across teachers (e.g., Armor et al., 1976; Hanushek, 1971, 1992; Murnane, 1975; Murnane & Phillips, 1981). These analyses consistently show large and significant differences among teachers. To give some indication of the order of magnitude, the estimated difference between a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ teacher in poverty schools of Gary, Indiana, was approximately one grade level per academic year (i.e., **a student with a good teacher might progress at 1.5 grade equivalents in a school year, while those with a bad teacher might progress at 0.5 grade equivalents** (Hanushek, 1992)). Moreover, the consistency of individual teacher effects across grades and school years **indicates that the estimated differences relate directly to teacher quality and not the specific mix of students and the interaction of teacher and students.**” (Hanushek)*

In other words, “good” teachers substantially improve the achievement all students, regardless of the diversity of the student population.

More recent data from the “Measuring Effective Teaching Project” funded by the Gates Foundation substantiates the large effect on student achievement of effective teaching and demonstrates that effective teaching can also be measured effectively.

*“On average, the 2009–10 composite measure of effective teaching accurately predicted 2010–11 student performance. **The research confirmed that, as a group, teachers previously identified as more effective caused students to learn more.** Groups of teachers who had been identified as less effective caused students to learn less. We can say they “caused” more (or less) student learning because when we randomly assigned teachers to students during the second year, we could be confident that **any subsequent differences in achievement were being driven by the teachers, not by the unmeasured characteristics of their students.** In addition, the magnitude of the gains they caused was consistent with our expectations. “*
(Ensuring Fair and Reliable Methods of Measuring Effective Teaching, 3rd report, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)

Note that this study also concluded that effective teachers improve student achievement regardless of the diversity of the students in the class.

There is significant research that provides evidence that effective teaching improves achievement for all students, regardless of the diversity of the student population.

Based on these research results, the diversity of the student population in the district is not a defensible explanation for the relatively poor levels of student achievement.

A significant body of research exists that provides clear evidence that effective teachers are the single most important resource in a school or district seeking to make substantial gains in student achievement. The district, based on state assessments, and the recent District Review, needs to substantially improve student achievement. The logical conclusion would be that the district administration should work with teachers in a collaborative, positive manner to do everything possible to maximize the potential of the district teaching staff, with the goal of substantially improving student achievement.

However, the district administration seems to be intent on adopting strategies that harm classroom teaching. The district administration withholds **earned** steps from teachers, effectively devaluing the work done by these teachers. Teacher's pay is purposely low in the early years of teaching, because beginning teachers are serving a sort of apprenticeship. The promise made by the teacher's contract with district administration is that pay will increase with experience—steps are earned by successfully serving the apprenticeship. However, the district administration has chosen to renege on this promise during both of the last two contract negotiations. How the district administration expects that withholding the payment of earned steps will lead to improved classroom teaching, or show teachers that their work is valued, is unclear.

The district administration also chooses to engage in a combative, dysfunctional relationship with the STA, which is unique among the many districts that belong to our regional technology director's group. It is instructive to note that the blame for this dysfunctional relationship is largely placed on the STA. As anyone with management experience knows, "there are always two sides, no matter how thin you slice it". The district administration can continue to fight with the STA, a strategy that has proven to be unsuccessful, to the detriment of both student achievement and staff morale, or it can choose to take a collaborative and positive approach to labor relations.

I had about 30 years of management experience before coming to work at Stoughton, culminating in eight years of managing a high technology company with a workforce of 135 people. The single lesson I learned from that experience was that the organization's people are the organization. Management's primary role is to support and celebrate the work of the members of the organization from the bottom up, not the top down. All of the rest of the "stuff" is largely superfluous. The education research discussed above indicates that this same management principle is also operative in education—the teachers are the district. It is not the district administration and it is not the other "stuff"—it is the teachers that are the district. The district's teachers are the potential source of the most substantial gains in student achievement. Improving student achievement--challenging students to reach their potential--is the primary mission of the school district.

Given the critical importance of effective teaching, the district administration's primary strategies should be focused on facilitating, recognizing, and rewarding effective teaching—maximizing the potential of all teachers to improve student achievement. Withholding earned steps and continually battling the STA are not appropriate strategies for the district administration. They are abysmally negative ways to treat the single most important resource in the district—the teachers.

I urge you to reconsider the decision to withhold teacher's earned steps. It is a poor decision, simply due to the negative impact on the younger teachers, who are the future of the district. It is a poor decision, because the district administration is reneging on its promise to teachers. It is a poor decision because it provides proof to teachers that the district administration cannot be trusted. It is a poor decision because it creates a negative climate within the district. Most of all, it is a poor decision because it is exactly the opposite of facilitating, recognizing, and rewarding good teaching.

Sincerely,

Lawrence W. Gray, Ed.D.