

Imagine a scenario in which you are asked to commit a portion of your salary to support the “company gym and spa.” Everyone pays into the fund, and in exchange, every employee has access to a full-service facility that improves the quality of life immensely. You wouldn’t feel too badly about it, would you?

But what if you found out that someone you work with has been asked to commit a smaller portion of their salary than you? A smaller portion, but with equal access? And what if at every renewal time, your boss increased your commitment at a rate that exceeded your increase in salary that year? How would you feel then?

You would probably feel resentful. You would probably also feel powerless to change anything.

The five towns that make up the Bedford Central School District (BCSD)—Bedford, Mt. Kisco, New Castle, North Castle, and Pound Ridge—are currently in a situation very similar to the one above. Let me explain.

Let’s talk about the current allocation of costs to taxpayers in our school district. Did you know that the Town of Bedford pays 49% of the tax levy, yet enrolls only 39% of the student population in BCSD? Similarly, Pound Ridge pays 24% while enrolling only 17%; New Castle pays 4% while enrolling only 3%, North Castle pays 2% while enrolling only 1%, and; Mt. Kisco pays 21% while enrolling only 41%. Wait a minute. This figure seems wrong. How is it that while the other towns are paying more to enroll less, Mt. Kisco is paying less to enroll more? So let me rephrase. Mt. Kisco gets to pay only 21% while enrolling 41%.

In New York State, apportionment of costs for school districts has historically been determined by property values, and not by usage. This is why this disparity between what we pay and what we get “makes sense.” This is why the residents of Bedford contribute \$33,169 per pupil, Pound Ridge contributes \$37,761, New Castle contributes \$35,011, and North Castle contributes an astounding \$72,343. Residents of Mt. Kisco, where property values are lowest out of all five BCSD towns, pay \$13,352 per pupil.

Given these numbers, I would be surprised if you told me that you didn’t feel at least a little resentful. Especially when you realize that this disparity exists even after you adjust for the different average family income in each town. Don’t feel badly about it; you’re not the only one. During a recent meeting, one resident stated that with the current tax structure of BCSD, New York State is essentially forcing four towns to subsidize one. An analogous example would be if the Rye School District merged with the Port Chester School District, only to have New York State remove the State subsidies currently being provided to support the Port Chester schools.

So what should we do? Sever ties with the colleague who isn’t paying their fair share to use the gym and spa? That’s not possible. The Mt. Kisco tax levy contribution is not enough to sustain an independent school district. According to the New York State Department of Education, the current \$13,352 per pupil contribution would place a “Mt Kisco School District” at the lowest per pupil spending in the State. The next lowest in the State would be the General Brown District in Jefferson County, at \$14,012.

For all of these reasons above, the 2016-17 BCSD proposed school budget is causing much discussion, and with it, controversy. This is despite the fact that John Chambers, the Interim Superintendent, announced on March 16, 2016: “I think you folks should be proud of your 8-year average.” With all due

respect, I think we would be foolish to be proud of 8 years of diminishing tax affordability, 8 years of program cuts, 8 years of decreased school ranking, and 8 years of lopsided (to say the least) allocation of the tax burden. However, I think what Mr. Chambers was referring to was his reassurance that the tax levy would only increase by an average 1.59% over the last 8 years should the proposed 2016-17 BCSD budget pass. A budget, by the way, that includes a vote to override the New York State Tax Cap. Mr. Chambers is right, but what we must remember is that a tax increase in one year, influences and grows our tax bill in every subsequent year (i.e., 1.59% of \$100 in year one increases the taxable amount to \$101.59 in year two). So for every \$100 a family paid in school taxes in 2009, that same family now pay \$113.36 in 2016-2017, a 13% increase.

Tax increases also need to be viewed in the context of the average household income in the District (this information is available in the Official Statements issued by BCSD when they sell capital project bonds). In the period between 1990 and 2000, the tax levy for BCSD increased by 46% while household income for the residents of BCSD increased by only 36%, a full ten percentage points lower than the tax increase. Perhaps this was explained by the fact that BCSD home values were also increasing during this time period. Incomes were growing and home prices were steadily rising, creating a “wealth effect.”

But then we crashed into the new millennium. Since 2000, we have had some challenging economic times: The aftermath of the dot-com bust, the early 2000s recession followed by a housing boom and the inevitable bust. For those who were able to retain their incomes, household averages declined by 6.8% from 2001 to 2013. Home values, while no longer at the nadir, continue to remain below their 2006-2007 peak.

BCSD taxes, however, increased by 65.07% between 2001 and 2013.

In 2015, the average BCSD household paid a larger percentage of their declining income towards school property taxes.

The five towns that comprise BCSD need to have a serious discussion surrounding the current allocation of cost to taxpayers for BCSD. No Town Board would enter into a shared services agreement that did not tie allocated costs to usage. Why are the Town Boards allowing this type of lopsided agreement to exist at Bedford Central School District?

The only way to stem the growing feelings of resentment, animosity, and distrust and bring us back to being the supportive communities we have been is to address the disparity that is affecting us all. We must somehow find a way to address this emotionally charged and politically distasteful disparity in our contributions so we can continue our growth as a community.

This will require a sea change, and the first step toward a change for equitable treatment is scheduled for July 1<sup>st</sup>, when Dr. Manno and his new team take over the BCSD administration. I, for one, am looking forward to hearing about Dr. Manno’s plans to restructure BCSD’s expenses and expense growth, thereby preventing further declines in the affordability of BCSD and continued erosion of academic programs.

Vincent Morrow