

Report from The

Superintendent's Task Force On

Communicating the Challenges

Facing the Belmont Public Schools

January 10, 2006

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dr. Peter Holland assembled the Task Force on Communicating the Challenges Facing the Belmont Public Schools in September of 2005 to contribute to fulfilling a Superintendent/School Committee goal to “publicize challenges facing the school system, how those challenges are being addressed, and the means necessary to meet them”.

The Task Force determined that an overall theme – proficiency for all – is the most pressing force underlying the many issues facing the Belmont Public Schools. Higher expectations for student performance, in combination with changes in education, government mandates, and constraints (financial, political, regulatory, increased learning needs, and social and family pressures), have created an unprecedented set of challenges to public education.

The Task Force developed a framework entitled “The Challenge Paradigm” that relates these issues, concerns, and challenges to each other in a unified way. This Paradigm provides a succinct core message about the needs of the school system, while being robust enough to support in-depth presentations of any of its elements to appropriate audiences. The Paradigm also aligns with the five-year Strategic Improvement Plan, which is the School Department’s most important roadmap for maintaining the excellence of our schools.

An explicit conclusion of the “Challenge Paradigm” is that the combination of challenges to our school system, each of which intensifies with every passing year, is putting our system’s excellence at risk. Without more resources, these challenges will make the quality of the Belmont Public Schools unsustainable.

The report identifies key variables that differentiate local Belmont audiences for the Paradigm, along with recommendations for various levels of emphasis depending on the audience being addressed. It reviews a number of methods and formats for presenting elements of the Paradigm in a variety of settings.

The Task Force addresses, and answers, some core questions posed by the development of the “Challenge Paradigm”. The Task Force believes that many Belmont residents can be influenced to support increased resources for the schools by using the Paradigm’s focus on the irrefutable validity of these challenges, and their ever-increasing nature.

Short-term recommendations, including public presentations of “The Challenge Paradigm” and a series of op-ed articles on its major elements, are combined with long-term recommendations, including the development of a Speakers Bureau, the investigation of additional in-depth projects, determination of funding sources for further research, and the possible creation of an ongoing Superintendent’s Communications Advisory Council.

BELMONT PUBLIC SCHOOLS BELMONT, MASSACHUSETTS

Report from the Superintendent's Task Force on Communicating the Challenges Facing the Belmont Public Schools January 10, 2006

I. Introduction

A major goal of the School Committee for the 2005-2006 school year is to:

Develop and publicize information for all groups of Belmont residents about the challenges facing our school system, the ways our schools are addressing those challenges, and the resources needed to meet them.

In the fall of 2005, the Superintendent of Schools proposed to the School Committee the formation of a task force that would focus study on the challenges facing the Belmont Public Schools. The study and subsequent recommendations from this task force would be a major contribution to the realization of the School Committee goal.

Formation and Charge

Dr. Peter B. Holland wrote the charge for the task force as follows:

The Task Force will establish a process and produce a variety of products that will inform and engage the residents of Belmont in a conversation about the current status of the Belmont Public Schools, the challenges facing the schools, and the resources needed to meet those challenges.

Dr. Holland continued by suggesting that the Task Force address key issues such as class size, changes in the student body, the impact of state and federal mandates, and public expectations about the role of schooling. He invited parents, School Committee members, and school administrators to serve on the Task Force. Task Force members include:

Patricia Aubin	Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction
Julie Barton	Parent and Wellington PTO Co-President
Denis Fitzpatrick	Director of English
Amanda Green	Parent and BSEAC Past Co-Chair
Deb Lockett	Parent and member of Action for Belmont's Future
Bruce MacDonald	Principal, Butler School
Lee McCanne	Director of Technology
Margaret Reynolds	Parent and Co-Chair of the BHS PTO
Ann Rittenburg	School Committee Member
Scott Stratford	School Committee Member

First Steps and Calendar

Task Force members began their work with general discussions among the membership to clarify the language of the charge and brainstorm the short- and long-range possible outcomes. In addition, Task Force members discussed the overarching principles and essential questions that would direct the work of the membership.

Task Force members outlined a work calendar and established a series of Friday morning meetings at the School Administration Building. To date, the Task Force has convened ten times. In addition to formal meetings, Task Force members made good use of e-mail to exchange ideas and draft documents for consideration

Task Force Activities

Document Review –

Members began with a review of available documents that provided information on the state of the schools. These documents included but were not limited to:

- School Matters: A Public Forum on Education Today, October 19, 2004
- Parent Survey Information (gathered from on-line survey of parents as part of the Strategic Planning Process)
- Review of School Committee Notes and Materials, 2003-2004 school year (Dare to be Average discussions)
- State of the Schools Message from Dr. Peter B. Holland, September 15, 2005
- Review of Summaries of Current State and Federal Mandates for Public Schools (including MERA of 1993 and NCLB Legislation, 2004)
- Notes from Family Matters by Robert Evans

Investigating Categories of Concern –

In an effort to work with the many ideas that emerged from discussion and reading, Task Force members generated a structure to organize information. Julie Barton suggested the following headings as a way to organize concerns: finance, pedagogy, social and familial, political, regulatory, and expectations (local and global). The homework assignment was to generate “talking points” for each category so as to expand the understanding of the group on the many concerns with which the schools are dealing and the challenges the schools are facing.

Written Work and Critique -

Denis Fitzpatrick suggested that Task Force members write information essays that would capture and organize the information on the various categories that emerged from the homework exercise and the discussions that followed. Draft essays exist on the topics of: Today’s Classroom, Finance, Expectations and Regulations: National, State, and Local; and Regulatory Challenges. The essays captured the many points brought out through previous discussions and exercises. Discussion surrounding each essay allowed the group to refine the focus and identify the core concepts needed to frame a response to the Superintendent’s charge for the Task Force.

A Theme Emerges –

All roads led to a single issue that encompasses the driving force of schools today –

Proficiency for All.

Throughout the history of public education, the over-arching goal of schools has been to provide equal access to opportunity for all students to learn. The fundamental change in public education in the new era of education reform is a new goal of equal expectations of proficiency for all. Universal proficiency has been added to universal access. Whether we discuss political influences, changing pedagogy, financial need, state and local expectations for student performance or state and federal regulations, the group agreed that the single factor of proficiency for all students -- regardless of academic, socioeconomic, familial, first language, and/or racial background -- is a major force challenging and changing schools, teachers, administrators, families, and students.

Task Force Members agreed that higher expectations for student performance, coupled with funding constraints and increasing strains on today's families, are the crux of the forces pressing on today's classroom where proficiency for all students is the charge.

II. “The Challenge Paradigm”

Based on our document review, our investigation of categories of concern, and our preliminary written work, Task Force members developed a framework for expressing a single, cogent thesis about the challenges facing the Belmont Public Schools. This framework – hereafter referred to as “The Challenge Paradigm” – is most succinctly stated as follows:

To a greater extent than ever before, the Belmont Public Schools face challenges that put their continued excellence at risk. Expectations for the performance of our schools have never been higher. Today’s classrooms must meet the varying learning styles and skill sets of every child as an individual, while moving steadily towards an unprecedented mandate of universal academic proficiency. Meanwhile, financial, regulatory, and political constraints become more pressing each year. Increasing student learning and behavioral needs, coupled with increasing social and family pressures that affect students’ readiness for the work of school, put further stress on our system. Through the Strategic Improvement Plan, Belmont’s schools can address the most pressing elements of these many challenges. However, doing so will require even more support than our community has been able to provide in the past.

The Challenge Paradigm can be divided into separate elements, each of which can be discussed or presented in greater detail as the need dictates in any given situation. In a more expanded form, the elements of the Paradigm can be listed as follows:

The Thesis

The challenges facing Belmont’s school system are greater—both in number and in degree—than at any previous time in its history. Unless the public understands these multiple challenges, recognizes the stresses that these challenges are putting on our students and educators, and is willing to provide the resources that are needed to meet them, we are at risk of jeopardizing the excellence that has made the Belmont Public Schools a civic treasure for generations.

The Core of the Challenge

Our school system is caught between the pressure of ever-increasing expectations, on the one hand, and steadily increasing financial, political, regulatory, social, and developmental constraints on the other.

The Expectations

Belmont residents have always set high expectations for our school system. We value education because we understand its fundamental importance to our society, to fulfilling our children’s potential, and to our collective future.

Our expectations are increasing even further because of the sweeping changes that are transforming our world into a knowledge-based global economy that makes a strong education a necessity for more people than ever before. Our students must be prepared to compete against the rest of the world to maintain the standard of living that previous generations have achieved.

The Changes in Education

Education has changed in fundamental ways over the last several decades. Because of an increased understanding of the differences among students, both in how they learn and the pace at which they learn, teachers are trained to use “differentiated” instruction that de-emphasizes traditional lecturing from the head of the classroom. Instead, teachers employ proven instructional techniques that provide differing ways for students to understand and master their academic subjects. At the same time, schools now offer the same curriculum material to all students, rather than diluting the curriculum for students for whom learning comes less easily.

We strive to create a learning environment in which every student is challenged to reach his or her full potential. For some students, a goal of basic educational proficiency is a nearly insurmountable struggle. For others, schoolwork comes so easily that they must be provided with advanced material to remain productively engaged in their studies. For the great majority of students, who are somewhere on a spectrum between these two extremes, today’s educators must use a variety of teaching methods for effective instruction because of students’ differing learning styles and learning skills.

In an ideal world, school systems would maintain small class sizes at all grade levels to accommodate the varied needs of all students; would integrate a robust variety of additional personnel to assist teachers in addressing student needs, both in classrooms and in other settings within each school; would retain a sufficient number of administrators to ensure the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction, and outcomes at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels; and would invest, carefully but fully, in state-of-the-art technology to support learning, teaching, and administrative functions.

Of course, education takes place in the real world, not an ideal one, whether in Belmont or any other community. Our school system has a long and documented history of high performance using fewer resources than other systems to which we compare ourselves. However, the challenges facing our system may soon make our historic excellence unsustainable.

The Mandates

State and federal accountability mandates—most notably MCAS testing and “No Child Left Behind”—are compelling Belmont, like all other communities, to attain a new standard in education: universal proficiency for every student in our schools. These mandates are imposing a level of academic requirements that American public education has never seen before.

Belmont’s school system is required to achieve even higher and more consistent standards than previously. Student outcomes are required to demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” toward full proficiency for all students. In doing so, we must confront many constraints and concerns, each of which becomes more challenging with every passing year.

The Constraints

Financial constraints are a constant concern. Education is a highly personnel-intensive enterprise, which results in ever-increasing costs because of labor market pressures and the soaring cost of health insurance. Turnover among new teachers, and an ongoing stream of retiring veteran teachers, now requires Belmont to hire more than 50 new staff members each year. We must compete with the highest-paying school districts in the state in hiring new teachers and administrators—and then invest in training and mentoring them, while overcoming

the loss of experience and expertise that their predecessors had. Fixed costs, including maintenance, equipment, and utilities, must also be met in order to protect our investment in facilities. Maintaining our existing technology, while adding new technology initiatives to improve teaching and learning, is very expensive. Meanwhile, costs for special education, MCAS remediation, and other student services continue to go up.

Political issues are another concern to schools. Spending on education, at the local, state, and federal levels, reduces funding for other important government-sponsored needs. Unless school systems continuously improve, citizens (as taxpayers and voters) may question the effectiveness of public education. Increased taxes, for any purpose, are often viewed as a burden on citizens rather than as an investment in the public commonwealth. Measures of school performance, and school improvement, are frequently reduced to test score comparisons—even when the tests were not designed for that purpose.

A related concern is the increasing regulatory burden on schools, administrators, teachers, and students. Education reform has produced a new bureaucracy that overwhelms administrators and teachers with voluminous reporting requirements and guidelines that require immediate compliance. Surveys, reports, program reviews, audits, and multiple simultaneous “plans for improvement” crowd out the tasks that administrators and teachers were hired to fulfill. Of greater import, the ever-increasing attention to testing and reporting has infringed on the instructional time of our classrooms. Teachers and students spend precious instructional time preparing for weeks of mandated testing, rather than spending time “on task” to ensure student learning. Moreover, the new regulatory environment is moving steadily towards reducing every student to a single test score, and every school system towards no higher purpose than making their test scores increase every year.

The increasing learning needs of many students are another growing concern. While the number of students receiving special education services is relatively stable, a greater number of special education students demonstrate severe or multiple disabilities, including cognitive or other developmental issues, which require more extensive programs than in the past. At the same time, our schools must also now help more students who have significant emotional or behavioral problems that are not addressed by special education services.

Pressures from family, social, and economic dynamics are also having a greater effect on education. Schools must deal with an increasing number of students who do not come to school prepared for daily school work, or who do not make the commitment needed to master the work of learning, and the body of foundational skills and knowledge that are at the core of education. More and more often, families are struggling to provide for the material and emotional needs of their children. Schools are increasingly called upon to attend to issues of childhood nurture and moral development those families, religious institutions, and other organizations traditionally inculcated. Schools must address these taxing social problems, at the same time that they are required to meet ever-advancing academic expectations for their students. While these pressures may be more prevalent in some other communities, we cannot ignore the fact that Belmont is not immune from them.

As a public school system, the Belmont Public Schools has no choice but to accept the higher expectations, and greater constraints, of educating all our students in the 21st Century. In a highly regulated, highly dynamic, and increasingly demanding environment in which more and more is expected from our schools, we must do more—but we will need more support in order to do so.

The Strategic Improvement Plan

Our Strategic Improvement Plan is a key element in our planning for the next five years. Addressing core goals and needs in six areas—curriculum, instruction, and assessment; student life; school management and leadership; human resource development; communications and community relations; facilities and financial planning and management—it gives direction to our school system’s efforts, and contains specific action steps that will lead to measurable improvements.

The Conclusion: Without Help...

We recognize, and can articulate, these ever-mounting challenges. What we cannot do, in isolation from the rest of the Belmont community, is to continue meeting them without more support.

Our school system is increasingly fragile, and in need of adequate and sustainable resources in order to meet the challenges that it faces. Unless our community can both understand our needs and help us address them, these challenges will place Belmont’s excellent school system at serious risk.

III. Communicating the “Challenge Paradigm”

In developing the Paradigm, the Task Force has been mindful of three vital, and interlaced, components of successful communication:

- consideration of the audience that is being addressed;
- the breadth and depth of the message being communicated; and
- the method or format of presentation.

Effectively communicating the complexity and challenges of public education, to various audiences having varying degrees of familiarity with contemporary schooling, requires a set of resources that is both flexible and “scalable”. The Task Force believes that the “Challenge Paradigm” is an effective framework for organizing and presenting the core message, while providing powerful options to enhance or deepen its arguments when doing so would help persuade a given audience to support school system’s needs.

Audiences

Even within the confines of Belmont, there are several potential audiences for the Paradigm with different characteristics and different degrees of familiarity with the schools. At the same time, the elements of the Paradigm are sufficiently general, and broad-based, to be used for public policy purposes in settings beyond our community. In meeting the requirements of our charge from the Superintendent, the Task Force has concentrated on the audiences in Belmont.

One way to categorize various Belmont audiences is a metaphor of “concentric circles”, with inner circles consisting of audiences that are already familiar with, and supportive of, the needs of the schools. Successive outer circles consist of other audiences whose understanding of the current demands on our system is not as well developed or who may not be as inherently supportive of the needs of the schools.

For example, many parents and other community members are significantly involved in supporting the day to day operations of one or more of our schools, and are highly aware of the issues and realities of today’s school settings. Many other parents are, at a minimum, aware of the issues and realities of their own children’s school settings. Parents of recent graduates of the school system are aware of the issues and realities their children experienced. Other town residents, meanwhile, may have had little or no exposure to the changes in education over the last few decades, particularly since the onset of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act and the No Child Left Behind legislation.

In addition to different levels of familiarity with current realities of public schooling, residents also differ in their inherent willingness to support the schools in relation to the overall cost of municipal services. Some residents gladly support increased resources for schools because they view them as a “public good” that is essential to Belmont’s character. Other residents, including many who are appreciative of the merits of a strong school system, are either concerned about the balance between spending on schools and other Town services, or about the overall property tax burden in a community of almost exclusively residential property tax payers.

The Task Force believes that it is crucial for the School Department and School Committee to be mindful of the characteristics of these different local audiences. Just as schools are no longer “one size fits all” educational institutions, the public is not a single entity with a single view schools, their qualities, and their needs for additional support.

The “Challenge Paradigm”, in its briefest form, can be used to address any or all audiences as a way of communicating the challenges facing the Belmont Public Schools. However, the Task Force recognizes that few audiences—other than those who already support increased resources beyond our current level of service—will be persuaded by a brief statement of constraints and needs. For that matter, we also believe that residents who already support our schools’ needs will be highly receptive to arguments that help strengthen their support, and help them act as advocates on the schools’ behalf.

The Paradigm contains a number of elements, each of which can be emphasized or de-emphasized in order to increase the chances of persuading any of these audiences to support increased resources for our school system. Some instances of this flexibility will be discussed immediately below.

Breadth and Depth of the Messages

As the Task Force discovered, the amount of information already available regarding the elements of the “Challenge Paradigm” is more extensive than any one presentation could cover. In fact, it is arguable that each of the major elements of the Paradigm could legitimately, and profitably, be given its own separate presentation. Furthermore, as Part V of our report will discuss, there is potentially even more information that could be developed in support of the elements contained in the Paradigm.

Therefore, presenting the Paradigm (or some of its component parts) in any given setting will require trade-offs between the amount of detail given to each element, on the one hand, and the overall presentation of the Paradigm on the other. The Task Force believes that this necessity can be one of the Paradigm’s greatest virtues—by taking a “scalable”, flexible approach to each situation and each audience. For example:

- An audience of strong school supporters—who already understand the dynamics of the modern classroom—might be more receptive to an in-depth look at family and social pressures that exacerbate the other elements of the Paradigm (and require more resources for behavioral specialists or guidance counselors).
- The audience at an early-morning presentation to the Rotary Club may be more influenced by a focus on a “day in the life” at an elementary or middle-school setting, in order to understand the importance of manageable class sizes in an era of differentiated instruction to accommodate different learning styles and abilities.
- The members of Town Meeting might be more supportive of a substantial increase in the school budget when presented with an extensive look at the costs—and potential penalties—of mandates such as the “adequate yearly progress” aspect of the No Child Left Behind Act in combination with Massachusetts Education Reform.
- A town-wide forum on Belmont’s top priorities, as hosted by the Vision 21 Implementation Committee, could be a good opportunity to emphasize the increasing expectations on our school system—within the context of our traditional pride in educational excellence, and the resources that are needed to maintain the strong outcomes of our schools.

While these examples are hypothetical, they illustrate the flexibility of the Paradigm framework. By concentrating on the most relevant elements of a compelling overall message, a variety of audiences—with different levels of understanding of our school system—can be influenced to support our view of the challenges facing the Belmont Public Schools, and the means that will be needed to meet them.

Methods and Formats of Presentation

In order to reach the different audiences that the Belmont Public Schools hopes to influence, and to tailor the breadth and depth of messages accordingly, a number of different methods and formats of presentation can be harnessed effectively. Within each of four different methods—oral presentations, written information pieces, local access video, and digital “convergence” media—the Task Force has identified various formats that we believe will be useful.

Oral Presentations –

PowerPoint-based presentations are an obvious, and powerful, method of presenting the challenges facing our schools. An overview of the “Challenge Paradigm” could be the focal point of a series of presentations to different audiences. Seeing the Paradigm in its entirety would give an audience an overall sense of the challenges at one sitting. Individual elements of the Paradigm could also be candidates for PowerPoint presentations. A more in-depth focus on a particular issue may be highly influential. Such topics as “The Multiple Roles of Technology In Education”, “How Social and Family Dynamics Affect Our Schools”, and “What Is ‘Differentiated Instruction?’” are just three of a substantial number of interesting topics, as elements of the Paradigm, that would stand on their own merits.

Written Information Pieces –

Written information pieces can accompany and reinforce oral presentations, or they can be used independently. Two such items—Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and tri-fold handouts—were enthusiastically supported by members of the Task Force.

Another form of written material is essays, such as the ones prepared during the Task Force’s information gathering phase, on topics of central importance to the school system. A well-reasoned essay on a topic such as Literacy, The Impact of Mandates, or The Growing Complexity of Special Education could firmly solidify the information base that might transform an interested party into an informed advocate.

“Op-Ed” submissions to the Belmont Citizen-Herald, although subject to length requirements, have the advantage of reaching the great majority of Belmont residents who stay informed about local issues.

Local Access Video –

Once the “Challenge Paradigm” has been given some public exposure, the newly energized Belmont Media Center could be used to develop video programs that are played in regular rotation on the local access television stations. A significant number of Belmont residents tune in to Channels 8 and 9 to be informed about local events and issues.

“Digital Convergence” Media –

A fourth category, interrelated with the other three, is “digital convergence”. This category can be defined as any combination of digital video, digitized textual material, and Web-based information delivery platforms (such as Microsoft Office Animation Runtime) that makes information available on a constant basis through School Department server computers. Whether the material is video captured during an oral presentation, PowerPoint slides, FAQs, essays (possibly with Web links embedded in them), downloadable tri-folds, or other items, this emerging technology may prove to be a popular, low-cost, and always-available way to disseminate useful information about the challenges facing our schools.

IV. Five Questions about the “Challenge Paradigm” and our Answers

Throughout the process of developing the “Challenge Paradigm”, the members of the Task Force kept returning to some fundamental questions that helped shape our work. We have elected to raise those questions explicitly in this report, along with the answers we reached as the outlines and elements of the Paradigm became clear to us.

Question One: *Don't the School Department and School Committee give dire warnings about the school system every year during the budget process—and then still provide an excellent education for our students?*

Some long-time observers of the Belmont Public Schools may claim that the school system has been predicting its own decline on an annual basis—typically in the context of proposed budgets that barely maintain so called “level-service” funding—for many years. These observers would posit that, since there are many indicators that show the ongoing quality of the system, including MCAS scores, average SAT I and II scores, state and national honors, and admissions to highly selective colleges and universities, the school system is exaggerating the stresses posed by these challenges.

The Task Force believes that there are two responses to this concern. First, the universal proficiency standard underlying the “No Child Left Behind” federal mandate is an unprecedented new demand for our schools. It greatly compounds the long-discussed issues of adequate funding, increasing student needs and family pressures, and high expectations for all that annually put pressure on our schools and school budget. Each successive year's budget compounds the short-changing of all these issues. In response, the School Department has reduced its number of administrators and classroom aides, textbook purchases, and maintenance and equipment budgets—to levels that are unsustainably low—in order to maintain acceptable class sizes for students. The need for these resources, in an era demanding universal proficiency, cannot remain unaddressed indefinitely.

Second, indicators such as college admissions and standardized test results show that many of our students continue to excel—but they do not reflect the increasing numbers of Belmont students who are struggling. For instance, more than 30 percent of Belmont high school students score below 500 on their English SATs, despite the fact that our average SAT scores are among the highest in the Commonwealth. Also, some MCAS scores—notably Math at the middle-school level—are showing increasing signs of slippage from year to year. At all levels of the system, administrators and teachers are more concerned than ever about substantial numbers of students who are not succeeding—whether because of learning issues, social or emotional problems, family dynamics, or other causes. Without additional resources, the number of students who struggle in our schools will continue to rise, even as our school system is held to higher standards than ever for their academic success.

Question Two: *By talking about all these seemingly intractable challenges facing the schools, does the School Department run the risk of alarming residents into thinking that the system is already in a crisis?*

Given our school system's historical reputation for excellence, it is certainly possible that an extended public discussion of the Challenge Paradigm and its potential consequences might lead some Belmont citizens to perceive that our system's quality has already begun eroding seriously. This could be particularly true if the challenges facing the schools are communicated using language that is excessively alarmist or dire, rather than using a tone that is appropriately serious without indulging in unsupported hyperbole.

The Task Force believes that these challenges are serious enough, and pressing enough, to warrant a community-wide discussion of their severity and potential impact. By the same token, we believe that they should be communicated in a very careful tone, using factual information and a balanced perspective that reinforces our system's proven ability to use its resources—including any new resources it might receive—in an effective way.

Question Three: *How can the School Department get more support from residents who no longer use the schools—or whose experiences with our schools in recent years may not have been ideal?*

As discussed in the "audiences" section of Part III above, different residents of Belmont have different levels of familiarity with today's school system. When communicating the challenges to members of the community who are not familiar with contemporary educational practices, it will be important to focus clearly—and persuasively—on the positive changes in education that have broadened its effectiveness by accommodating the many kinds of learners whom we now understand to comprise our student population.

When communicating the challenges to community members who are more familiar with our current-day school system, it is important to acknowledge that every person will be mindful of his or her own individual experiences with the schools—and that some of those experiences may diverge from our presentation of an excellent school system that is struggling with unprecedented constraints and expectations. By presenting a clear, broad, view of the most irrefutable issues facing the Belmont Public Schools as a whole, the Task Force believes that individual community members can, at the least, be persuaded to place their own experiences into a system-wide context that will support our school system's need for more resources.

Question Four: *Can the School Department document the issues described in the Challenge Paradigm to prove its validity to the community at large?*

The School Department already has a great deal of salient information to document the elements of the Paradigm. However, it will not be possible to provide every piece of information that every questioner might demand. Indeed, given the fundamentally irrefutable nature of these challenges—and the irrefutable increases in each challenge over time—little of this information would change all the challenges that the Belmont Public Schools face, or the need to address them.

Public education in the 21st Century is one of the most data-intensive and highly studied areas of government. In the era of Massachusetts Education Reform, the more active data-gathering efforts of the state Department of Education have generated immense amounts of demographic, testing, and comparative information that is used by policy researchers, school districts, and even the media in attempting to identify effective educational practices.

This vast amount of available data, however, does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of the challenges facing contemporary school districts. Policy-makers with completely opposite points of view can all produce favorable data to support their perspectives, with equal confidence that their data is definitive.

On any given element of the Challenge Paradigm, critics may demand extensively researched information that documents the issue to their satisfaction. This “burden of proof” may not always be attainable, particularly if the documentation the critics seek is not readily available—or is not typically used in the way they seek to use it.

That being said, the Task Force believes that the development of additional research, documentation, and analysis is an important long-term goal of the School Department. (See our long-term recommendations in Part V below.) The Task Force is confident that additional objective information will be much more likely to buttress the concerns expressed by the Paradigm than to undercut them.

Question Five: *Can't the school system do something about its problems besides asking for more money?*

The Paradigm is not solely—and in some ways, not primarily—a financial argument. Its core tenets include the dynamics of today's classrooms; the need for differentiated instruction; social and family stresses that continue to grow in an uncertain economic climate; and the constantly increasing demands of state and federal mandates, including an unprecedented requirement for universal academic proficiency. Unless our citizens understand these non-financial issues, they are far less likely to support additional resources for our schools. Indeed, if these issues didn't exist, the BPS would be less likely to need this level of added support.

That being said, there is no question that the challenges articulated in the Paradigm cannot be met effectively without additional financial resources. The Task Force believes that a town-wide discussion of “affording” to maintain our school system's excellence will be better informed if these challenges are clearly presented.

It is also important to note that no one budget cycle, or one increase in funding beyond the constraints of Proposition 2½, will likely be sufficient to address the full range of all these challenges. The situation outlined in the Paradigm has been years in the making—and the severity of its elements will continue to grow in the years to come. By taking a long-range view of these challenges, and by adding meaningful new resources whenever possible, the Belmont Public Schools will be far more able to manage the myriad demands of modern-day education. Without meaningful new revenues, sustaining the excellence of our schools into the foreseeable future is far less likely.

V. Moving Forward: Recommendations

Short Term -

In the “short-term” of the next six months (January to June 2006), the Task Force makes the following recommendations for communicating the challenges facing our school system:

1. **Develop a calendar of 30- to 45-minute public presentations** to various audiences, using a PowerPoint-based lecture format that presents the entire “Challenge Paradigm”, while focusing as much as possible on the elements that each given audience will find persuasive in the time allotted. (See the “Breadth and Depth” section of Part III for specific suggestions on elements that might be persuasive to various audiences.)

For each presentation, a relevant list of selected Frequently Asked Questions should be made available for distribution. One or more tri-fold documents, making a broad case for elements of the Paradigm that the presentation emphasizes, would also be advisable. After each presentation, there should be a formal “de-briefing” that identifies effective arguments, reactions or criticisms that should be anticipated in future presentations, and ideas for further refinement of the arguments in the Paradigm.

2. **Submit a weekly series of at least six “op-ed” opinion pieces** to the Citizen-Herald on the Paradigm, beginning with an overview comparable to the italicized version in Part II. In subsequent weeks, slightly more detailed pieces would cover individual components of the Paradigm (subject to the 700-word constraint on each submission). A concluding opinion piece could focus on the specific long-range needs of the school system, as reflected by the Strategic Improvement Plan.

The feedback from these opinion pieces will probably be less detailed than reactions to the presentations recommended above. However, the opinion pieces will reach the broad audience that pays attention to Belmont’s civic life—and, at a minimum, will strengthen the resolve of residents who are already strong supporters of our schools.

3. **Consider the creation of a formal “rapid response” capability** for answering criticisms of the schools, whether they arise in reaction to the “op-ed” pieces recommended above, or whether they arise in reaction to the ongoing FY07 School (and Town) budget discussions that will occupy a central place in the public discourse about the Belmont Public Schools in the months ahead.

The crucial elements of such a response capability are, first, its ability to address criticism quickly with responses in the appropriate forums (for example, a Letter to the Editor in the Citizen-Herald edition immediately following a letter containing criticisms); and second, a careful and judicious emphasis on factual (and, when available, empirical) information that addresses misperceptions or erroneous statements objectively.

The Task Force believes that the “Challenge Paradigm” creates a powerful organizing framework for addressing, and answering, critics of our schools. A “rapid response” program, using the Paradigm as its basis, would provide an ongoing basis of support by facing, and disarming, school critics as quickly as possible

Long Term -

Over a longer period of time, the Task Force recommends that activities like the following be given serious consideration by the Superintendent and the School Committee:

1. **Develop a “Speakers Bureau”** of administrators, School Committee members, and other advocates for the Belmont Public Schools to be available for presentations to school, town and (potentially) out-of-town groups. Over time, presentations of the Paradigm like the ones recommended in the short-term could evolve into a series of more in-depth presentations of individual topics that are important to the speakers—and that would engage audiences.

For example, a group that had already been (successfully) given the entire Paradigm might be very receptive to a presentation about “literacy”, broadly defined, along the lines of the speech given by Denis Fitzpatrick at the October 2004 Public Hearing on the State of the Schools. Another group might significantly increase its support for Technology after hearing about its uses for the business of schools, communication in the teacher/student/parent loop, and effective integration of technology into the classroom. Yet another group may be fascinated by “a day in the life” of a classroom teacher, as a practical illustration of many of the changes facing our schools.

We believe that a group of prepared speakers, presenting interesting topics on a regular basis, would both deepen and broaden the support from important local constituencies on behalf of our schools.

2. **Investigate more in-depth projects** beyond the scope of FAQs, op-ed pieces, tri-fold handouts, and other formats that present information that is already available concerning the challenges facing our schools. An idea that many members of the Task Force support, for instance, would be a video set in one or more Belmont classrooms—after gathering all necessary permissions, including student and parent releases—that portrays a typical day in the life of teachers and students.

Another potential project would be a moderator-led panel discussion, broadcast via the newly-invigorated local access Channel 8, on selected elements of the challenges facing the schools. Topics chosen for this format would have to lend themselves to a multi-person verbal presentation, since this format would not accommodate graphical or PowerPoint elements readily.

A third project, suggested by Dr. Lee McCanne, would be a Web-based integration of PowerPoint and video material—carefully designed to minimize “bit rate” requirements for home Internet users—that presents elements of the “Challenge Paradigm” in a format that interested parties could access in the 24/7 virtual world of the Internet. (A pilot version of this integrated technology was developed by Dr. McCanne after the October 2004 presentation on the Major Needs of the Schools.) The integrated technology allows users to navigate to issues in any sequence, and see video clips that accompany the information on the PowerPoint slides on the issues. In an era where information is increasingly expected to be available on a constant basis, this technology—which could easily be accessed through the Belmont Public Schools website—would be a powerful means of allowing residents to educate themselves on the challenges facing our schools. It could also be harnessed for on-site presentations where the ability to jump quickly from topic to topic was important.

Fourth, working through the elements of the Paradigm might provide a structured, and

finite, mission for the School Committee's sub-committee on Benchmarking. With the nearly limitless amounts of information available on schools and schooling, whether at the local, state, national, and international levels, it is difficult for an entity like the Benchmarking Sub-Committee to determine the best focus for its efforts. Deepening the analysis contained in the Paradigm, including comparative studies, demographics, best practices, and other benchmarking techniques could be an extremely fruitful task for the Sub-Committee.

These suggestions are by no means all-inclusive. As the process of communicating the "Challenge Paradigm" unfolds, other ideas will also present themselves as worthy extensions of the effort to increase public support for our school system.

3. **Determine potential sources of funding** for further work on this subject that will require financial resources beyond the present funding capabilities of the school system. Video development, in-depth educational research, broad-based publicity, or other extensions of the findings outlined in this report may necessitate fund-raising in order to provide the time, equipment, and expertise necessary to do them effectively.

It would be advisable to identify specific projects, with defined budgets, that the School Committee and Superintendent jointly support (possibly including some of the projects suggested above). These projects could then be presented to organizations like the Foundation for Belmont Education, PTA and PTO groups, various "Friends Of" school support organizations, or other private fund-raising avenues in order to fund them. The Task Force believes that the set of issues that comprise the "Challenge Paradigm" is crucial to determining the future success of our schools. As such, efforts to publicize the challenges and maximize support for the Belmont Public Schools should not be confined to activities that are within the School Department's existing resources.

4. **Create an ongoing Superintendent's Communications Advisory Council.** Over the course of preparing this report, the Task Force has identified far more issues, possible information pieces, and data-gathering projects than our four-month time frame has allowed us to explore fully. We strongly recommend that the Superintendent create an ongoing Communications Advisory Council that will direct, produce, and help publicize further extensions of the information contained in our report.

By creating the framework of the "Challenge Paradigm", along with an analysis of potential audiences, identification of some information formats, enumeration of some likely critical reactions to the Paradigm, and listing our short- and long-term recommendations, we believe that we have satisfied our charge. However, much remains to be done—not only to meet the recommendations we have made, but also to ensure that this initial project is maintained, deepened, and (ideally) ingrained into Belmont's civic discourse for years to come.

A number of our Task Force members would be willing to serve in such a capacity. However, we recommend that the Superintendent assemble a team of individuals, from different perspectives among "stakeholders" in our school system, who are willing to work hard in a team effort to extend the process, and the products, developed by the Task Force.

The Superintendent should maintain close control over all the information disseminated by such a group. The tone, objectivity, and accuracy of information about the Belmont Public Schools will be critical to the ongoing effectiveness of all advocacies on its behalf.

VI. Conclusion

The members of the Task Force are acutely aware that Belmont has many pressing needs, with limited financial resources to address them. We realize that Belmont's residential property tax bills are among the highest in the Commonwealth—and that all facets of our municipal government must fulfill their functions without the kinds of resources that comparable communities can provide. "Working smart" and maintaining the highest levels of cost effectiveness are not goals in our community; they are necessities.

We believe that the Belmont Public Schools have been a model of fiscal responsibility and cost-effectiveness for many years. Our school system, its employees, and the many residents who donate their volunteer efforts and private funds to the schools are to be commended for all that has been accomplished—at lower per-pupil expenditures than in any comparable school district.

Likewise, we believe that the Town, through the Selectmen, Warrant Committee, and Town Meeting, should be recognized for its efforts to fund our schools. Working collaboratively with the School Department and School Committee, the Town has made substantial efforts to support the school system as a priority in annual budget determinations.

Despite all these notable and long-standing efforts, the Task Force believes that the Belmont Public Schools faces a set of challenges, articulated as the "Challenge Paradigm", that are unparalleled in the system's history. Each of these challenges—constraints, mandates, and changes in educational practice—is daunting in its own right. When combined together, in a dynamic that sees each of them increasing every year, they pose a real and growing threat to the sustainability of a school system that has been a source of civic pride for generations.

The School Department and School Committee must present these challenges in a coherent and broad-based manner, to ensure that all Belmont residents understand the critical needs of our school system. We have every confidence that our community will respond to the challenges identified in this report, and will find a way to ensure the excellence of our schools for the generations still to come.

APPENDIX A

THE “CHALLENGE PARADIGM” IN OUTLINE FORM

The “Challenge Paradigm” can be divided into separate elements, each of which can be discussed or presented in greater detail as the need will dictate in any given situation. In outline form, the elements can be presented as follows:

- I. A thesis statement: our school system’s continued excellence at risk
- II. The challenges: higher expectations, more constraints and concerns than ever
- III. Expectations
 - a. Belmont’s local expectations, both historical and current
 - b. National and global expectations for education in the 21st Century
- IV. How education has changed over the past several decades
 - a. “One size” (one teaching style) does not “fit all”: Differentiated Instruction
 - b. The ideal educational environment (class size, resources)
 - c. The real educational environment (constraints, limits)
- V. Mandates (No Child Left Behind, MCAS) and the new Universal Proficiency Standard
- VI. Constraints and concerns facing public education
 - a. Financial constraints
 - b. Political constraints
 - c. Regulatory constraints
 - d. Increasing Student Learning and Behavioral Needs
 - e. Social/Familial Pressures
- VII. Addressing the most pressing challenges: the Strategic Improvement Plan
- VIII. The need for (even more) support for our schools