

Beacon Hill Byline – by Mary Rogeness

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Boost from Statehouse restores hope to schools

School opened last week in Longmeadow with the usual complement of new sneakers, new bikes and new teachers. And this year there is one more “new” - a new enthusiasm because the school budget is more sound than it has been for years. The state's college system is also the beneficiary of new funding as the fall semester begins. The good news for education comes from a variety of factors at both the state and local levels.

Elementary and secondary schools have benefited from the state budget in two ways. A stipend of \$100 per student inserted in the state budget after local budgets were established, giving Longmeadow \$260,000 in unexpected funds, and the appropriation provided additional funds because of conditions placed on the new money. To prevent localities from using creative bookkeeping to transfer money into other accounts, the legislature required school budgets to maintain last year's budget in order to receive the new appropriation. Longmeadow's 1993 budget was \$60,000 lower than last year, so the town will add the money to the base amount in order to trigger the additional state aid.

Last spring the Legislature had high hopes for an education reform package that would accompany the additional state funds. I regret that the effort has been sidetracked. The Education Committee has announced plans to continue work on reforms next month. However, with two elections and a lame duck session ahead, that reform seems unlikely to be achieved.

Longmeadow has also used the School Choice program to augment the education budget. This state program was enacted a year ago to allow districts to accept nonresident students whose tuition is paid by their home districts (with state help). Some of the new faces in our schools this year result from the Choice program, and our classrooms are strengthened by the new students while the system gains from the tuition that accompanies them. Financial gains, however, are less than expected because the Legislature amended the funding formula to reduce the tuition by 25 percent from the dollar amount that existed in the first year of the program.

We have seen the hopefulness in local schools because of new monies and, as students return to state colleges, there is a corresponding vitality on the campuses. After years of cuts, higher education this year received a 9.1 percent increase. Administrators and instructors are buoyed by that factor. The years of contraction have been hard on the entire system, and a one-year reprieve will not restore the system to robust health. It should, however, halt the decline of educational offerings to our children.

In summary, September is a month of hope for the students of Massachusetts. The Legislature has responded to local educational needs and the governor has supported new money for higher education. We are all still in the process of adjusting to changing times and insufficient revenue to accomplish traditional government functions, but we have affirmed by our actions that education is a priority in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.