

COMMENTARY

The Hour

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Library services to be maintained despite reductions

At a time when budget reductions are having a negative impact on city services, we are pleased to see that the Norwalk Library Board of Trustees will maintain its service hours despite cuts.

There is one exception — Sunday hours at the main library will be reduced in keeping with the city's mandate that all departments cut their budgets by 3 percent.

We have always supported the local library system and have considered it an extension of the city's educational system. But it's more than that — now with many people losing their jobs, the library provides them with an opportunity to go online and to research the daily newspapers.

This comes at a time when Les Kozerowitz retires as director, along with several other library employees. Frank Ferro, assistant library director, will take over the task of running the library with a reduced staff.

We have warm place in our hearts for libraries as the storehouse of so much literature and history. They also provide a selection of CDs and DVDs, items that may be out of reach for those whose income has taken a big hit.

We hope that the good side of the situation is that people will read more books — how can you find a cheaper source of entertainment or education?

Danbury Branch gets federal transfusion

The infusion of \$30 million to upgrade the Danbury branch of Metro-North rail system is good use of some of the stimulus money being doled out by Gov. M. Jodi Rell's Recovery Working Group.

The money will provide the line with a centralized train control and signal system. The line has been operating like it was in the 19th century, not the 21st, with the conductor having to manually operate a switch at a siding to allow another train to pass.

The value of the line could be more enhanced by adding more trains with newer cars. Perhaps as Metro-North gets some of its new rail cars now on order, some of the older ones could be rehabbed for the Danbury Branch.

There are other needs to improve the line — re-electrification, an improved roadbed and the greatest addition would be a second parallel track.

Who knows? Some day it may expand northward, as it once did, going all the way to Pittsfield over the Bay State border.



From the Norwalk Education Foundation

Improving education in Norwalk

Inspiration. Dialogue. Cooperation. You don't often initiate and implement change without them. The recent Education for Leadership Conference "Levers for Change" hosted by the Yale School of Management provided just such opportunities for a number of Norwalk educators and local education advocates.

The Norwalk Education Foundation invited them to attend the conference in order to start a dialogue about how we can improve Norwalk schools by learning what other districts around the country are doing. Attendees included administrators from the public school's Central Office, Board of Education members, principals, local nonprofits and those of us from the Norwalk Education Foundation.

The daylong conference included a keynote speech by Joel Klein, chancellor for the New York city schools, as well as panel discussions on an array of topics from developing excellent teachers and school leadership to solutions for reducing school dropouts.

Bob McCain, principal of Nathan Hale Middle School, said the conference speakers were well-known education professionals from around the country. "The conference was full of big-thinking, thought-provoking ideas and discussion, and included panelists that are the top minds in their field."

Linda Whitton, board member of the Fairfield County Community Foundation, where one of the top priorities is closing the education gap in Fairfield County, said she was overwhelmed with the caliber of the attendees and the conference. "There were incredible speakers and panelists, and a high degree of interest and professionalism across the board from everyone in attendance — educators, principals, faculty, nonprofits, education advocates." Her biggest takeaway was a feeling of optimism. "Even though the problem of closing the achievement gap is huge, going there gave me hope that with so many resources and so much knowledge focusing on this, we can do this."

McCain said much of what he heard confirmed for him that

ANOTHER VIEW

Lauren Rosato
Executive Director
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they were moving in the right direction at Nathan Hale and in the Norwalk Public School system. "In the panel discussion on charter schools, there were many things they were doing that we are doing at Nathan Hale. Similarly, what the Norwalk School district is doing with regard to its data teams and assessments both confirmed to me that what we're doing in Norwalk is the right way to go."

Fay Ruotolo, Human Resources Officer for Norwalk Public Schools agrees. "We heard a lot of confirming things which is always nice to hear especially from a group that is not just internal educators. To hear this from corporate donors and those that are outside looking in is very reaffirming."

Certainly, the conference confirmed for those of us at NEF that there are many good things happening in Norwalk Public Schools that are right on target with the best of the best in this country. NEF is convinced that we as an organization are on target with our efforts in teacher quality and classroom innovation. Cathy Killeffer of NEF said the overall take-away from the conference was the need for collaboration and change. "The main themes that we continue to talk about at the NEF — innovative classroom techniques, teacher quality, student achievement - were discussed at the conference in ways similar to the NEF philosophy."

Similarly, Ruotolo noted that one of the sessions on teacher professional development was in line with what Norwalk is working to do. "The speaker noted that it is most effective when professional development is imbedded rather than apart from their job. This is to say that rather than send teachers to outside workshops, they have a consultant come into the classroom using materials the teacher is actually going to use."

It's clear, however, that we need to get these messages out more. For example, the people who are most important to improving public education - the teachers, are in the minority at

these conferences. NEF is working on helping our teachers participate more in these types of conferences and trainings, as well as bringing innovative ideas and programs directly to them. To this end, we are expanding our teacher training this year and connecting our classroom innovation grants to it. For example, if a teacher has a great idea on how to teach a certain curriculum, and NEF provides grant funding for it, we are now asking that teacher to share their ideas by teaching a class for other teachers on their innovative project.

Whitton points out that the only way we're going to make schools work for everyone is if we work together to attack the problems from all sides. "There isn't just one solution to the achievement gap, there's 150 and we have to work smart and combine our efforts to be more effective and efficient."

NEF realizes that to really make progress in Norwalk schools, we must rethink the basics such as how we teach children and for how long, how we train and compensate educators, and how much responsibility a parent should take to ensure their child's educational success. Thirty years ago, our public education system was the premier system in the world. Today, close to 27 countries have caught up or surpassed us. We simply must change to stay globally competitive.

It is NEF's hope that we can continue to facilitate participation by the district and BOE members in other conferences which highlight why changes are necessary. We see it as a positive way to open lines of communication between us as well as introduce us to new solutions.

Norwalk Education Foundation is an independent nonprofit organization committed to quality education for all of Norwalk's children. We effect positive change by providing programs and funding for innovative classroom instruction, teacher and technology training, and a variety of learning opportunities beyond the school day. For more information call: (203) 854-4068 or visit www.norwalkeducation.org

Letters Rules

We welcome readers' views, but retain the right to reject any letter and to edit for length and clarity. Letters should focus on issues, rather than other letter writers. Letters must be limited to 300 words and include contact information. Writers are allowed one letter per week. Send to letters@thehour.com, fax to 840-1802 or to 346 Main Ave., Norwalk CT 06851. Please submit by only one method.

TheHour.com POLL

Do you agree with the mayor's proposal for unpaid furloughs for the city's top employees?

Yes 78.57% No 19.05% Unsure 2.38%

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