

Conroy: Educational excellence creates opportunities

By Tom Conroy

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Through my own experience, I have seen how educational excellence and lifelong learning can create opportunities amidst an increasingly competitive world. The lessons I learned are applicable to our children and the towns of Lincoln, Sudbury and Wayland, too, where we are facing significant challenges maintaining the high quality of our schools amidst cutbacks in state aid to our towns by Republican governors.

When I wanted to shift from working in public sector to the private sector, I knew I needed to get a graduate degree. I had worked in the U.S. Congress for two U.S. senators and had helped refugees in Southeast Asia as a contractor to the State Department - great experience. But professional jobs in the private sector required an understanding of economics and commerce, and technical training. The liberal arts education I received at Yale wasn't enough to make the transition from government to business.

So in my 30s, I returned to school to get a master's degree in international economics. The degree opened new doors for me, allowing me to find a great job in management consulting at a firm in Boston. For five years, I worked closely with the Massachusetts state government to generate tens of millions of dollars in non-tax revenues by applying creative ideas and rigorously using information technology. I was able to learn a great deal working for a private firm that had aligned its interests with the goals of state agencies.

And yet, I wanted to learn how the largest companies in the private sector worked, and that meant getting a master's in business administration - an MBA.

By 1999, I was working during the day and attending an MBA program at night. Nearly halfway through the program by mid-2000, I joined a firm in Lexington that offered strategic and management consulting advice to Fortune 500 companies. I finished the MBA in December 2003, and I've been more effective and more able to take leadership roles in my professional career since that time.

Like many of the residents of Lincoln, Sudbury and Wayland, I want to ensure that our children get a great education in our public schools so that they can have a great start in this competitive world and acquire the habit of lifelong learning. This will help ensure that they get good jobs as adults and be upstanding, contributing members of our society.

But the future of our schools is at risk. We don't have enough school funding to maintain the excellence we want for our children. We aren't getting enough aid from the state to provide marginal salary increases to our teachers, or keep up with the rising costs of school supplies, infrastructure needs and utility costs in our schools.

Excellence in education requires adequate funding so our children can learn within great schools from superb teachers. That's what I've heard in talking with parents at their doorsteps while running from door to door. School committee members in each of the towns with whom I've spoken say the same. Teachers of my own four daughters at the Happy Hollow Elementary School in Wayland repeat the refrain - we're not getting the state aid we need. The facts support the point - Republican governors have cut state aid to our towns by almost \$700 million since 2001.

If I am elected state representative, my highest priority will be to generate more state aid for our towns, something that our existing state representative, Susan Pope, has been unable to do. I know that I can be effective:

- I have a proven track record of helping increase our state's non-tax revenues;
- I can work collaboratively and effectively with the new governor and legislative leadership; and

- I can provide new ideas to help our state economy grow and increase commercial tax revenues.

In Wayland, our almost 50-year-old high school is in need of repair and, likely, rebuilding. I was an active member two years ago in an effort to review financing mechanisms for rebuilding the high school, and the clear conclusion was that we need the state's School Building Assistance Program funding to do it. We need to get that program, which has been shut down for the past few years, restarted so that we can get matching state dollars for the rebuilding effort in order to hold down local property taxes.

We face other educational challenges in our state, such as adequately funding the special education circuit breaker program for families with children with special needs. For these families, it's difficult facing the everyday challenges. I will work to make their situation more equitable, more like the rest of us, and less burdensome.

We need to correct the imbalance that seems to exist in our schools today in terms of over-emphasizing testing at the expense of learning and teaching. I believe in testing, and setting high standards, but the reporting requirements are overly burdensome, are not sufficiently funded from federal or state sources, and too often waste valuable teaching time, only confirming what we already know at the local level.

We must also focus our attention on the threat of guns in our schools. Can we imagine the tragedies of Columbine and the Amish country in Pennsylvania being repeated in our schools in Lincoln, Sudbury or Wayland? We need more oversight of gun ownership, stricter licensing requirements, and stronger efforts to stop the flow of illegal firearms into our state. We need a state representative who worries more about sensible regulation of firearms and less about achieving the endorsement of the NRA. We don't have that now, and that's placing all of our children at risk.

Educational excellence is a hallmark of our towns and our commonwealth. It's one of the most important reasons many of us live in Lincoln, Sudbury or Wayland. Our challenge is to improve our schools, without simply raising property taxes.

As your state representative, I can help lead the way in ensuring that our schools are well supported, well funded and safe. I ask you to vote for a better future for our children and our schools on Nov. 7 by voting for me, Tom Conroy.

Tom Conroy is running as a Democrat for state representative in the 13th Middlesex District, which includes Lincoln, Sudbury and Wayland.