



Education wins – what’s next?

By Sally Chapman Cameron

It’s a big win for the Southcoast.

Within a week of each other, two municipalities asked voters to step up and approve debt exclusions to build new schools. By 2-to-1 margins, Westport and Fall River made resounding decisions to say yes.

As a member of the Bristol County Chamber Education committee and consultant to both campaigns, it seems to me that this win accomplishes more than just building two badly needed secondary schools. It also united two communities to talk about educational aspiration and to come together to jumpstart the future of our children now and for generations. No matter how you voted, these schools are being built for you, too.

Both Fall River and Westport voted to exclude the cost of their share of the bond to build the new schools from the Prop 2 ½ tax levy. It does not raise taxes permanently; it does not eliminate Prop 2 ½; it was required to match the funds offered by the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA).

On both sides in both municipalities, everyone said they supported education – but the “no” side said they were against investing in this way. In Fall River, most everyone agreed that falling-apart Durfee needed a solution. In Westport, despite a middle school closed by PCB contamination and an aging high school, those against the plan thought that the town couldn’t afford to fix the problem. But it is hard to see how building schools that accommodate the changes needed to prepare students for the 21st century is anything but the ultimate support for the changing face of education and of the 21st century workforce.

Education has changed dramatically since many of us now in the workforce were in school. I was in the “chalk and talk” system -- I sat in rows in my classroom facing the board, while my teachers provided me information. And don’t even think about talking in class (which was my downfall, as evidenced by comments from my teachers on report cards.) The teachers were the channels – we were the receivers. We were expected to work alone; to process alone; to produce alone; and we were graded on the output.

The internet changed everything. Now students have access to an immeasurable amount of information. These digital natives know how to find stuff – for good or ill. At the same time employers discover that the so-called “soft skills” – collaborating with peers, communicating on many different channels, cultural sensitivity – are needed to address the changing nature of the world. It can make a difference in a global competition.

Education has changed to adapt to developing those skills. Teachers become coaches that help students access and assess information to use in compelling and thoughtful ways. Students now work together to collaborate toward a goal – a group project on dinosaurs, or a class digital newspaper. Using the ubiquitous technology in the world, they prepare to take their places in it.

What these new investments in both communities mean is that teachers will have the tools and the purposeful construction and facilities to remove hurdles to providing students with this 21st century education. Our kids will be able to compete effectively in a worldwide marketplace with those who live in communities that have the foresight to accept the Commonwealth’s investment in us, and to step up to do our part. Let’s keep talking about how to make education better and to keep the momentum going that does more than just build buildings -- but keeps education “top of mind” as the primary economic driver for our region. We will all benefit from this healthy discussion.

Cameron is Communicator for ThreeC Strategy, a strategic communications firm, and a member of the Education Committee of the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce.