

Remarks by Jan Andrews, Arlington Schools board member and co-chair of HALT, at news conference held by Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) at the central administrative offices of the Kingston City School District, May 18, 2006

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to represent the Arlington school district, which is located across the river in Dutchess County and has over 10,000 students. We fully support the efforts by the AQE to call attention to the serious problems with school funding in New York State. I am a member of the Arlington School Board and a parent of two children, one in middle school and one in high school. Like most of the school districts in the Hudson Valley, our budget was just defeated. This is unusual and occurred despite the fact that our tax rate increase was lower than it has been in the last few years.

I can attest that our residential taxpayers are extremely frustrated and upset with their school tax burden. Despite having over the years a very low cost per pupil for our region, Arlington taxpayers currently pay up to 50% higher taxes than our neighboring districts, even though those districts are able to spend up to 30% more on each of their children than we do. Our efficient spending is not rewarded with a lower tax rate for our residents.

There are a number of reasons for this, including the fact that we do not have much commercial property in our district and the fact that our enrollment has been growing steadily for a long time and caps on the state aid formula prevent it from providing the proper funding for this growth.

There are more general reasons, as well, that affect virtually all school districts in our region and across the state. Some of these have already been mentioned and will be noted repeatedly today, such as the fact that the average U.S. state contribution towards the cost of public education is 55%, yet New York State now contributes only about 40% of the cost. Our taxpayers must make up the difference.

Another major problem is the way in which state aid, such as it is, is distributed in New York State. It is distributed on a political basis, with the same set "share" going to NYC, Long Island, and the rest of us Upstate each year regardless of need. The amount of aid given to specific school districts is based on a formula that is famous for being incomprehensible and unfair, and which countless educational organizations agree needs to be radically revised.

Multiple proposals from different organizations to distribute state aid based on need, and not politics, would provide Arlington with between 55% and 73% MORE state aid than we receive today – up to \$20,000,000 each year that we deserve but do not receive.

One source of pressure on our budget and hence our taxpayers is special education, which is very expensive. Only a small part of the cost is reimbursed by the Federal Government, even though the Federal Government makes the rules we must follow, and originally promised to pay 40% of the costs. Instead, the bulk of the cost is borne by the local taxpayers. Our school district has taken a case all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States in an effort to protect our taxpayers from being saddled with additional special education costs that do not directly support educational services.

Our taxpayers demand that we reduce spending, but how can we when most of our costs are required by law? Mandates such as the testing programs required by New York State and now No Child Left Behind impose unavoidable costs. Pension costs for employees and teachers are set by state boards over which school districts have NO control. This year, increases in pension costs alone constitute nearly a third of our tax increase, about \$3,500,000. We have kept a tight lid on those costs over which we do have control, in an effort to protect our taxpayers where we can. This means we are virtually unable to offer new educational programs or services that would benefit our children.

The gap between the large rise in costs that are largely uncontrollable by the school district (pensions, fuel costs, health benefits, testing, and the like) and the small rise in state aid GROWS each year. The longer it takes to fix this problem, the harder it is to solve.

All of our taxpayers, but especially those on fixed incomes, are finding it more and more difficult to pay their school taxes, and are angry that we are not able to control the increasing costs that cause taxes to continue rising at too rapid a rate. The annual school budget is almost the only public budget that is voted on, and voting no is a way to express frustration with high property taxes in general and other rising consumer costs. Many feel that the property tax system is unfair because it does not consider ability to pay. Yet we do not see our state legislators taking serious action to address this by proposing a real alternative to the current system that would address any of these problems. We have formed a committee called Help Arlington Lower Taxes, or HALT, whose mission is to publicize these issues and pressure our government representatives for a legislative solution to provide some form of tax relief, which we desperately need.

Thank you.