

# Affording a better quality of life

**By Mark A. Hughes and Mark D. Benigni**

Education is the way for our children — yours, ours, and all — to afford a better life. If Meriden is going to continue to be a great place to live, work and raise a family, then education must matter. Every strong community has an effective public school system. Meriden is no different.

There is good news. The approved proposal for like-new renovations at our high schools and the addition of eight all-day kindergarten classrooms show the type of commitment to our children and our future that we can all be proud of. Not many other towns or cities can boast such a strong city, state and federal collaboration. Yet, it is what happens inside these buildings that will matter most. After four years of local reforms and hard work by teachers, current seventh grade students have increased their achievement at the Goal Range by 28 percent in mathematics and 22 percent in reading. These 2006 to 2010 increases are the best in the state. Our Meriden District Assessments (MDAs) continue to document that our students are achieving real academic growth.

We must continue to keep our focus on individual student progress and on what works despite the challenge of tough times and often

unrealistic mandated national standards that come to us with inadequate funding.

As the City Council has taken the courageous yet necessary steps to modernize our high schools for 21st century learning, our high school students continue to amaze us. Meriden high school students are challenging themselves with advanced placement and early college experience classes in Biology, Calculus, Chemistry, Computer Science, English Literature, European History, French, Italian, Latin, Music Theory, Spanish, Statistics, Studio Art, and U.S. History. Our students attend some of the country's best colleges and universities: Boston College, Brown University, Boston University, Colgate University, College of the Holy Cross, Fairfield University, Fordham University, Georgetown University, George Washington University, John Hopkins University, Providence College, University of Connecticut, Wesleyan University, West Point, and Yale University have all welcomed our recent high school graduates. Once there, our students perform well, make contributions, and then graduate well positioned to be mature, productive citizens.

The Meriden Board of Education recently approved the administration's recommended 2.93 percent budget increase. This request to our city leadership is about \$2,922,875 more

than last year. So why a 2.93 percent budget increase? Federal dollars are decreasing, state funding is at best flat, and all things cost more each year. We cannot build new facilities and upgrade our current schools without providing the necessary funding for their successful operation. We cannot afford to cut our advanced placement and gifted and talented programs. We need funding for quality electives and extra-curricular activities. We need to challenge our students with new technology and the latest educational resources. We need reading teachers and intervention specialists to assure that all students are learning at high levels. We need after school programs and summer opportunities to assure that our students' learning is much more than six hours a day, one-hundred eighty days a year. We need this support... now more than ever!

Our school system, city, state, federal government, and citizens of Meriden must continue to partner to assure that our public schools remain a source of pride and professional practice. There is far too much at stake for the city's financial future and the quality of life for all our citizens. Our schools must continue to meet the needs of all our learners. Challenging coursework and enrichment activities must encourage our brightest most gifted students. Diversity is what makes Meriden a

special community and schools are a direct reflection of their community. As we look to our schools to draw young professional families to Meriden, we must also be sure that the quality of our schools continues to keep families here in Meriden. These are typically involved families, who frequent our churches, volunteer in our youth leagues, patronize our restaurants and shopping centers, own homes, pay taxes, and vote.

This request was built with great deliberation and respect for the tough times we all face. Through the process of developing this budget, we took a very close look at our operations and service delivery models, cutting costs and securing efficiencies. In tough times, there is no greater investment than the one we make in a child. We have a recipe for success — only with proper resources and hard work can we continue experiencing the gains that our students have achieved. When a community is committed to working together, living together, and supporting education, it can ensure a better quality of life. Let's build the Meriden we all imagine. We cannot afford anything less.

*Mark A. Hughes is President, Meriden Board of Education; Mark D. Benigni is Meriden's Superintendent of Schools.*