

PITTSFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT

S.A.U. #51

John J. Freeman, Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools

23 Oneida Street, Unit #1
Pittsfield, New Hampshire 03263

Phone: (603) 435-5526
Fax: (603) 435-5331

March 30, 2010

Dear member of the PMHS community,

SUBJECT: **PMHS Transitions**

Introduction

Over the past week or two, a number of parents, community members, and staff members have asked about the impact of the budget and have also checked the accuracy of rumors regarding staff and program changes with the PMHS office. This letter is intended to provide you with information regarding the transitions occurring at PMHS.

Key Factors in Staff Reduction

With the approval of the 2010-2011 budget at the March School District Meeting, the school district has been able to finalize staffing plans for next year and has moved forward with school staff reductions discussed during the budget process. In summary, the equivalent of more than ten staff positions – from administration, teachers, guidance, and support staff – will be eliminated for next school year.

As you may know, this reduction represents the second consecutive year of staff reductions in the district. When the 2009-2010 budget was approved in March 2009, it provided for the reduction of the equivalent of more than nine staff positions throughout the district.

The two-year district staff reduction includes the equivalent of:

- 1 administrative staff position (PMHS assistant principal)
- 9+ teaching positions (PES and PMHS)
- .5 guidance counselor position (PMHS)
- 9 support staff positions (PES and PMHS)

Three key factors led to the decisions regarding these staff reductions.

- **Current Economic Conditions.** Certainly, all Americans recognize that we are in the midst of very difficult economic conditions. Most of us know folks who have lost jobs and folks who have lost or are in danger of losing their homes.

In New Hampshire, for example, our unemployment rate went from 2.7%, or less than 19,000 people unemployed in January 2000, to 7% or more than 52,000 people unemployed in January 2010, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. And although the rate of foreclosures has recently lessened a bit for New Hampshire, RealtyTrak reports that nearly 2,000 New Hampshire citizens lost their homes during the last quarter of 2009.

We are also keenly aware of the impact of the current conditions on states, municipalities, and school districts. On our state level, services are being reduced and costs are being shifted, one example of this cost shifting is the increased burden being placed on towns and school districts for funding the New Hampshire Retirement System. And we are all aware that federal stimulus funds are being used to support operations in the states.

Revenue deficits are being reported by school districts from coast to coast, and the districts are taking dramatic measures to address shortfalls. Of course, the biggest school systems are the ones making the news: New York City may be laying off as many as 8,500 teachers, nearly 11% of its teaching staff; Pittsburg has closed eighteen schools and has put them up for sale; Kansas City is planning to close nearly half of its schools; Montgomery, Alabama, is planning to lay off 415 teachers in its first phase of reductions; and school districts in California have distributed layoff notices to about 22,000 teachers and administrators, or about 7% of its workforce.

In Pittsfield, the School Board has worked with the Town Budget Committee to develop a budget with no tax impact. Because of a number of factors, including increased health insurance costs and the state's cost shifting of the retirement system contributions, a zero tax impact budget has necessitated a reduction of nearly \$300,000 when compared with the current year budget.

For most school districts, personnel costs represent a large proportion of the budget. Typically, personnel costs represent about 70-80% of the total school district budget. This is true in Pittsfield as well. As a result, school districts are forced to think about personnel reductions when faced with the necessity to make budget reductions.

- **Student Enrollment.** Like many area school districts, the Pittsfield schools have experienced a decline in enrollment in recent years. Economic projections for New Hampshire have suggested that the current enrollment levels should be steady for the foreseeable future. Of course, only time will tell.

Looking back eighteen years, we find that the total district enrollment reached a high of 854 students in 1995-1996, and reached a low of 616 students in 2008-2009. The current enrollment is 633 students.

The loss of the Barnstead high school tuition students, certainly, represents an important factor in our enrollment history with a high of 69 Barnstead students in 1995-1996. The year prior to the opening of Prospect Mountain High School in the fall of 2004, 56 Barnstead students were enrolled at PMHS.

Because of the loss of Barnstead tuition students, the enrollment decline was more dramatic at PMHS than at PES. Over the eighteen year period, PMHS enrollment reached a high of 437 students in 2001-2002 and a low of 267 in the current year. This represents a decline of 170 students, or 39%, over an eight year period.

This impact occurred without a significant decrease in the number of teaching staff. As a result, average class sizes decreased significantly over time, particularly at the high school level.

- **Per Pupil Costs.** Question often arise about a school district's *per pupil costs*, or the amount of money that it costs to educate one student for one year in the school district. In New Hampshire, the state Department of Education collects financial data from school districts and calculates an official per pupil cost for each level of schooling – elementary, middle, and high schools – for each school district in the state. The latest comparative data available is for the 2008-2009 school year, the year prior to the recent two-year staff reductions.

Of course, small schools, like small businesses, would typically compare poorly with larger schools or large-scale averages. It should come as no surprise that many of the most expensive schools in New Hampshire, based on per pupil costs, are small schools, this is particularly true of small high schools.

For 2008-2009, the state reports per pupil costs for elementary school students in Pittsfield were \$13,500.52, or about 12% above the state average of \$12,095.86; for middle school students, the Pittsfield cost was \$14,545.92, or about 30% above the state average of \$11,160.93; and for high school students, the Pittsfield cost was \$16,751.76, or about 45% above the state average of \$11,573.01.

Taken together, these factors – our current economic conditions, a decline in student enrollment, and our relatively high per pupil costs – support the case for cost containment. And, for school districts, cost containment means staff reductions.

“Persistently Low Achieving Schools”

Many are aware that PMHS has recently been identified as a “persistently low achieving school.” What does this mean, and what impact will this designation have on PMHS?

- **State Achievement Tests.** For more than ten years, the State of New Hampshire has conducted large scale assessment of school achievement through the use of standardized tests. These tests were originally administered to students in three grades – third, sixth, and tenth grades – when initiated in the mid-1990s.

With the passage of *No Child Left Behind*, the federal government required the testing of additional grades of students. At this point, large-scale standardized tests are administered to New Hampshire public school students in grades three through six and grade eleven. These state-level tests, known in New Hampshire as the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), are considered to measure a school's success in teaching students to the learning standards adopted by the State.

Critics of the NECAP and similar assessments have caution that use of the results of a single test for high-stakes decision-making is suspect because of the limitation of this sort of data to reliably identify strengths and weaknesses. Others suggest that measures of a school's success should also include data on school climate, dropouts, student aspirations, and success of graduates in college and careers. Regardless, the NECAP is our state's single measure of school achievement.

In Pittsfield, our NECAP scores have generally trended upward as our students and teachers have worked to better prepare our students for their futures. However, despite these trends of steady improvement, most of us would like to see higher NECAP scores, scores that would be combined with other assessments, such as success of graduates in college and careers, in assessing the quality of our educational program.

- **“Rapid Improvement.”** In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education announced a dramatic increase in funds provided to school districts through the states to “support rapid improvement” in the “persistently lowest achieving schools.” To gain these funds for New Hampshire, our State Department of Education followed formulas developed by our federal government and used NECAP results to identify and prioritize the “persistently lowest achieving schools.”

As a result of this funding opportunity and identification process, Pittsfield Middle School (the State classifies PMHS as two schools: Pittsfield Middle School and Pittsfield High School) has been identified as one of thirteen schools in *Tier I*, the highest priority schools identified as in need of “rapid improvement.” Pittsfield High School has been identified as one of five high schools in *Tier II*, one of the five New Hampshire high schools most in need of “rapid improvement.”

Being classified as such does not mean that we do not graduate students who are successful in college and careers. It does mean that our PMHS NECAP scores, though they’ve improved, are below those of most other schools in the state.

The upside of this designation is that we are eligible to participate in the U.S. Department of Education’s 2009 School Improvement Grant program, a program that will bring at least \$50,000 per school (remember, PMHS is two schools in the State’s eyes) per year for the next three years.

Of course, the district will apply for these funds and has begun planning uses for these funds to support significant school improvement. We anticipate a very positive outcome of the use of these funds for the “rapid improvement” of PMHS over the next three years.

In fact, this funding will come to us at a particularly opportune time. These resources will support a significant change that has already started – thanks to the work of faculty, staff, students, and community members – the planning for *high school redesign*.

High School Redesign

- **American High Schools.** Last fall, we began our work in planning for significant change at PMHS, change known as *high school redesign*. Simply stated, by engaging in high school redesign, we recognize the inadequacy of current outcomes of the high school experience nationwide and seek to redesign our structure and delivery of instruction to respond to current and future needs of our students.

By and large, today’s American high schools look very much like high schools of the twentieth century. In fact, the today’s curriculum was defined by the National Council of Education in 1892. Despite a number of initiatives launched to change and update high schools throughout the 1900s, schools don’t look much different as a result.

Because the the high schools have not adapted to changes in the world outside the walls of the schools, outcomes have been inadequate. Consider:

- The U.S. graduation rate peaked in 1967; at that time, the U.S. posted the highest graduation rate in the world; we are now #8, behind such countries as the Czech Republic, Korea, and the Slovak Republic.
 - It is estimated that a student becomes a dropout in the U.S. every 9 seconds.
 - In a large-scale international comparison of student achievement (PISA), U.S. students placed 15th of 29 in reading literacy, 25th of 30 in math literacy, 21st of 30 in scientific literacy, and 24th of 29 in problem solving.
 - In a recent survey of employers of high school students, 81% report deficiency in written communication, 70% report deficiency in work ethic, 58% report deficiency in self-direction.
 - In a recent survey of college professors, 70% report lack of ability in reading complex material, 66% report lack of ability in analytical thinking, 65% report lack of work and study habits.
- **Redesign in Pittsfield.** During the winter and spring of 2009, our school district hosted a number of open community forums that began a community conversation about what our schools should look like and what we should expect our graduates to know and be able to do when they receive their diplomas. Building on this foundation, a group of students, community members, and educators convened in November 2009 to begin to create a vision of a Pittsfield Middle High School that would better serve our students.

This vision includes four key elements:

- **Curriculum:** identified core curriculum of essential learning; specific graduation requirements in terms of what graduates will know and will be able to do; senior projects; development of skills needed for success in career, college, and citizenship.
 - **Methodology:** project-based learning; options for demonstrating course competencies; inquiry-based instruction, driven by questions and relevance; personal learning plans developed by each student; close collaboration and mutual support between regular education and special education teachers and staff; strong relationships with families and student-led student/parent/teacher conferences; development of *extended learning opportunities* that will enable our students to take advantage of learning in our greater community.
 - **Organization:** the development of a site council to open up decision-making to students, community, and staff; flexible scheduling of the school day; dedicated time within each week for professional staff development and team planning / monitoring of student progress.
 - **Student/Teacher Relationships:** higher expectations; commitment to the learning of each student; advisories organized to address a broader variety of relevant student needs; teachers in roles of coaches supporting student learning.
- **Pittsfield's Assets for Redesign Success.** PMHS has associated with the Center for Secondary School Redesign for technical assistance in this important project. This assistance will include

summer institutes to support our teachers as they develop new structures and strategies as well as ongoing school change guidance and staff development. Of course, this exciting transformation will take time, time measured in years and not marking periods. And we're fortunate to have a few important factors in our favor.

One of these assets is our size. In the past, large schools with plenty of options for students have been seen to be the ideal. More recently, however, small schools, with strong relationships among students and staff, flexibility to make quick changes in response to student needs and changing conditions, and willingness to access resources outside of school have been viewed as a preferable model. Many formerly large schools have been divided into smaller units and organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have been strong supporters of the movement to scale down the size of our high schools.

Another asset is the availability of successful models. Many small alternative schools and charter schools have emerged over the last twenty-five years. In fact, members of our visioning team have been inspired by visits to several such schools in Massachusetts and New York. In our visits, we found engaged, excited learners taking charge of their own learning, and we found outcomes in terms of class discussions and student work that more closely resembled college-quality than that produced by typical high school students.

And a third asset is the support and energy for this process displayed not only by our faculty and staff but also by many Pittsfield citizens who have learned about our plans for the new direction for our schools. This support is greatly appreciated and is essential to our success.

We are optimistic that our redesign efforts will result in a much-improved PMHS, a PMHS that will be characterized by higher standards, higher levels of student engagement, and higher levels of student achievement. Importantly, the changes will be getting under way in the fall of 2010.

Staff and Program Changes

The convergence of several factors has led to a variety of changes for the 2010-2011 school year at PMHS. These factors include the economy and cost containment, student achievement and status as a persistently low achieving school, and high school redesign.

A good deal of conversation and weighing of options has taken place in the school district over the past seven to eight months, resulting in the following staff and program changes for the 2010-2011 school year.

- **Advisories.** We will continue to build on our advisory program; our advisories will meet for shorter, more focused periods of time daily.
- **Assistant Principal.** The PMHS assistant principal position has been eliminated. Administrative duties have been reorganized. Among other duties, Ms. Lois Stevens, Special Education Coordinator, will take the lead on student discipline at PMHS.

- Attendance. We will continue to place an emphasis on student attendance. Over the course of this year, we have developed a system of notification and action that will support good attendance, which is a key factor in high school completion and in school success.
- Discipline. We acknowledge that student discipline has not been ideally managed over the years. We have recommitted to a positive school environment that supports learning; effective, fair student discipline is an important element of a positive school environment.
- Extended Learning Opportunities. We will be continuing to develop opportunities for students to follow their interests and access experts outside of the school building to learn and gain graduation credit.
- Extra-Curricular Activities. We are seeking to expand our program of extra-curricular activities. Involvement in extra-curricular activities has been shown to have a positive effect on student achievement and student grades. We are currently surveying our PMHS students to learn of unmet needs in our extra-curricular program.
- Family and Consumer Science. The current Family and Consumer Science position will be reduced to half time due to low enrollments.
- Foreign Language. French will no longer be offered on site. We are developing plans to support students who have begun their study of French at PMHS. Spanish will continue to be offered.
- Guidance. One half of a guidance position has been eliminated. PMHS students will be served by our Guidance Director, one full time Guidance Counselor, and one half time Guidance Counselor.
- Heterogeneous Classes. Classes will be heterogeneously grouped; this means that students of varying ability levels will be assigned to classes together. Teachers will differentiate instruction to provide for personalization of instruction for each student.
- Math. One PMHS math teacher will be reassigned to PES; all PMHS math teachers will be certified math teachers.
- Music. The current Music position will be reduced to half time due to low enrollments.
- Personalization. Active student engagement is an essential element of school improvement. We will be seeking to help our students become more actively engaged in their own learning through a variety of strategies including the development of personal learning plans, project based learning, and student led conferences.
- Principal. As Interim Principal Mr. Rick Gremlitz completes his service to PMHS, we welcome Mr. Bob Bickford as our new principal. Mr. Bickford was recommended to our School Board by a large search committee that included students, parents, School Board members, PMHS faculty and staff, and administrators. Among Mr. Bickford's strengths are his work with extended learning opportunities, high school course competencies, and high school redesign.

- Schedule. Our PMHS schedule will include several new components; these include:
 - The development of three academic core teams – grades 7 & 8, grades 9 & 10, and grades 11 & 12; these teams will closely monitor the progress of each student;
 - Daily common planning time to allow teams to monitor student progress;
 - Delayed openings on Wednesdays to allow time for staff development;
 - Flexibility with schedules within teams to allow for special projects and events.
- Teaming. A greater emphasis on teaming to support collaboration between and among various elements within PMHS.
- Technology. Increased classroom application of technology to engage students and to support learning.

Conclusion

Certainly, the 2010-2011 school year will be a year of transition for PMHS as we seek to maximize student learning in the face of staff reductions and program changes. Though we'll likely experience a few bumps in the road, I'm confident that the changes that are being made will benefit our students and our community. I have every reason to expect that our fine faculty and staff will continue their strong efforts to support our students on the road that lies ahead.

I would also like to invite you to an informational meeting scheduled for 6:00 p.m. on Monday, April 19, at PMHS. This meeting is intended to provide you with an opportunity to hear about these changes at PMHS and also to welcome incoming PMHS Principal Bob Bickford to our community.

Finally, I thank our community for your strong support of Pittsfield's students and Pittsfield's schools.

Sincerely,

John J. Freeman, Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools