More Letters

School Board Should Void Community Council's Decision

To the editor:

I am writing to support Michael Heaney's appeal of the decision to eliminate the decile system at Souhegan. I also question the speed with which this decision was made; the Community Council's failure to adequately address parents' and students' concerns; as well as Souhegan's apparent lack of preparation in having anything to replace the decile system. Finally, Souhegan does not seem to understand the unfairness of eliminating the decile system for the Class of 2012. A trust has been violated between the school and its students.

Short notice was given for the April community forum. Turnout was low. Yet, some Community Council (CC) members thought a second forum in May unnecessary. In the April 18 meeting minutes, one member remarked, "I think educating the parents is important, although I don't think another forum will influence our decision as a council. Regardless of the turn out or what the parents say, I think the outcome will still be the same." Another member said the council did not need further discussion, but the public forums "make us look better." These CC members seem to have made their decision even before the second forum and were not open to the public's concerns. How prevalent was this attitude?

Another member remarks, "The idea of the public forum is to inform them and educate them." I respectfully ask, is it not also an opportunity to take into account the public's concerns?

Many issues were raised in both forums, including: what questions the authors asked colleges; the small sampling of colleges called (15); the affect on scholarships (many require class rank); the affect on international school applications; and will no class rank force colleges to look more at standardized tests.

On May 23, I attended the first CC meeting after the second forum hoping to hear a thoughtful discussion of parents' and students' concerns. The meeting began with a motion to table to proposal in order to address those concerns. One member said, "I think that if taking a few extra weeks to make this decision will make the public happy, then we should do so, because I don't want to put Community Council's authority in jeopardy" (CC May 23 minutes). However, another member said, "I think that if we wait just to make the community happy, then that would undermine our power." Other members voiced similar opinions. I respectfully ask, how does waiting in order to investigate parents' concerns undermine the CC's power?

No concerns were addressed. Instead, there was a push to vote. Discussion focused on "covering our backs" with letters from the administration and Guidance Department. One member said that the CC needed the letters so that when angry parents said "the inmates are running asylum," the CC could show those supportive letters.

The CC voted to eliminate the decile system. On June 6, the appeal was presented to the CC. Throughout the appeal process, parents and students repeated their concerns and offered new information.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling reports that 24 states (including NH) offer about $600 million per year in merit-based aid that is partly based on class rank; 50% of private institutions use class rank in allocating merit aid and scholarships. Also, 92% of schools report either numeric rank, percent rank or grade distribution; the elimination of the decile system means Souhegan joined the 8% of schools who do not report any of that information to colleges. Despite the many valid questions raised, the CC denied the appeal.

It seems that many CC members had their minds made up even before the second forum. Valid concerns were ignored. Souhegan never provided the historical facts and figures proving the decile system harmful to students. I respectfully ask the School Board to void the CC's decision. Let's create a study group that fairly represents all community members and examine the decile system, its impact on past students, the consequences if eliminated, and whether or not there is a better system. Let's hear and respect the facts on both sides and give this issue the research and examination our students deserve.

Finally, let's honor the commitment made to this year's top-decile seniors and recognize academic excellence.

Susan Vámos
Amherst

Taxpayers Should Hold School Board Accountable

To the editor:

The recent decision by the Souhegan Community Council to eliminate decile ranking of Souhegan High School students, despite numerous specific objections by parents, shows how easily the role of parents and taxpayers in the community can be disregarded. The Community Council is comprised of students and faculty members, and would commonly be referred to as a "student council" in other schools. This council was designed to handle the small issues associated with high school life, such as security cameras, cafeteria rules, and cell phone usage at the school. However, decile ranking is not a small issue. Parents were alarmed at the lack of research behind the proposal and the speed with which it was passed. The Council, however, did not seriously address the concerns of the parents for one reason: parents and taxpayers don't get to vote on Community Council decisions.

Parents and taxpayers hold a legitimate stake in the outcome when the issues being decided will impact property values, college acceptance, competitiveness for academic scholarships, or any other lasting impact beyond the "four walls" of the Souhegan campus. They should, therefore, be properly represented in the decision process. The way in which the public's representation is ensured is through School Board meetings. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the specifics of the decile decision, taxpayers should be alarmed that their interests can be so easily ignored on any issue simply by the School Board handing the decision off to a student council. This is a flawed process that needs to be changed. The School Board should be responsible for this type of decision so the community can speak directly with their elected officials.

The Community Council is granted its power by the Souhegan Cooperative School Board, and the School Board derives its power from the taxpayers. The School Board members did not properly represent the interests of the taxpayers in this decision, and the taxpayers should make this clear. To prevent any further breakdown of trust with the community, the School Board should immediately reverse the Council's decision pending a thorough, objective review of the many serious concerns that were raised. In addition, the School Board should amend the Community Council bylaws to restrict the Council's scope to matters that have no impact beyond the school grounds. If the Board chooses not to restrict the powers of the Community Council, the voters of Amherst and Mont Vernon may feel compelled to protect their own interests and to remind the School Board who they ultimately answer to. It would seem counter-productive of the School Board to ignore the concerns of taxpayers when they will soon need to ask for their support for budget increases. I urge all citizens of Amherst and Mont Vernon to actively protect their ability to impact decisions in the schools that we are paying for.

Respectfully,
Scott Gowell
Amherst

Community Council Seeks New Members

To the editor:

The Community Council of Souhegan High School is currently searching for a community member from both Amherst and Mont Vernon to serve a one year term on the Council, beginning in October. Community Council acts as the governing body of all school affairs at Souhegan High School. It operates as a link between students, the community, the school board, and the faculty/staff of the school. There are 48 voting members of the Community Council made up of students, faculty/staff, the Dean of Students, a board member and five community members from Amherst and Mont Vernon. The Council meets as a body at Souhegan every Monday at 2:15 p.m. for about an hour. On the last Monday of the month, Council meets in the evening from 6:00 – 8:00 p.m. As a member of Community Council, you will have the opportunity to interact closely with students and faculty, be at the center of important deliberation and decision making at Souhegan, and, most importantly, provide the vital communication link between the high school and the community. Not only is it rewarding, but it's also a great way to get to know Souhegan better.

If you are interested in serving on the Community Council, or have any questions. please contact Mary Lou Mullens at Mmullens@sprise.com by September 15, 2011. If you have any questions, please call Mary Lou Mullens at 424-0687. Thank you.

Mary Lou Mullens
Amherst

Protect Our Fisheries From Coal-Fired Power Plants

To the editor:

As a person who has enjoyed fishing in New Hampshire for many years, it saddens me to think about the high levels of mercury pollution that is found in our state's lakes and streams.

Mercury levels have become so high in our waterways, and consequently, in the bodies of fish that swim in them, that New Hampshire has issued strict guidelines for the consumption of fish. People who eat fish that have been exposed to mercury are at risk for permanent brain, and nervous system damage.

In fact, several lakes in our state have mercury levels so high, it is recommended that children and pregnant women not eat ANY fish from them! One of the lakes on this list is May Pond in the town of Washington. This surprised me because I had gone camping, and fishing at this pristine lake a few years ago with my son. We decided to keep the pickerel and a yellow perch we caught, and cook them over the campfire for dinner. Later that year I found out about the high level of mercury in that particular lake.

Besides putting a damper on a father and son's fishing trip, mercury pollution is a serious threat to our environment, and anyone who eats fish. Mercury levels are increasing each year in ocean water as well, and several species of seafood have recommended restrictions for consumption. Mercury also interferes with a fish's ability to reproduce.

The main reason for the increasing amounts of mercury in our water is because mercury is emitted into the air by coal burning power plants. When it rains or snows, it ends up in the water. Thankfully, New Hampshire has passed a law to greatly reduce the amount of mercury being emitted from our coal burning power plants. It can be done by installing new equipment in the power plants. Unfortunately, much of the mercury that ends up in New Hampshire's water has drifted here from coal burning power plants in Midwestern states. This is why the Environmental Protection Agency has proposed to update the Clean Air Act, and require ALL states to reduce mercury emissions from power plants.

This situation demonstrates the importance of the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Clean Air Act, at a time when some politicians are talking about doing away with both of them. It won't be enough if a few willing states make the effort to reduce mercury emissions. All of the states have to do it.

Dan Rodd
Amherst

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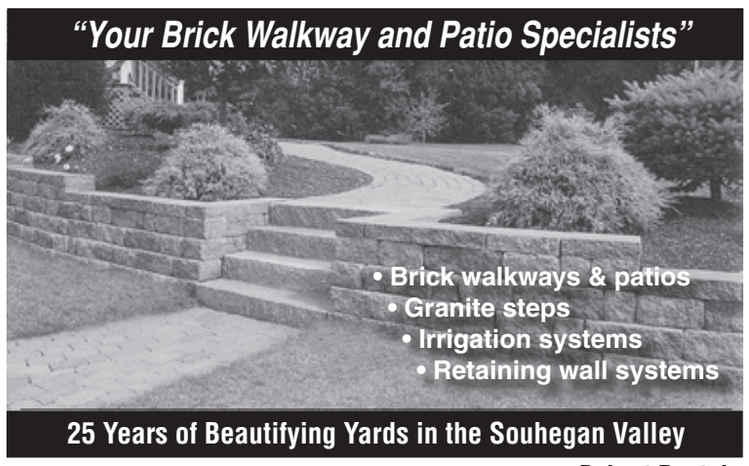
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