

More Letters

School Board Tackles Enrollment and Cost Per Student Issues

To the editor:

The Souhegan School Board would like to thank all of the parents, students, staff, SAU School Board members, and community for coming to our Deliberative Session on February 5. We are thankful for the support, thoughtful comments, and questions raised. It was wonderful to hear from students and parents alike who expressed appreciation for the education, preparation, and experience that Souhegan brings. We thank the many staff members for attending; in particular, we appreciate the comments from the members of the high school's negotiating body who spoke about their feelings of connection to our community, even if they don't live here, which led to the acceptance of a proposed contract highlighted by a 0% cost of living increase for the entire staff over the next two years.

For those unable to attend, we would like to highlight some key elements of our budget presentation. Enrollment and cost per pupil have been the biggest part of this year's budget discussions, as high schools across the state face decreasing enrollments and increasing cost per pupil. Some facts regarding these two budget elements:

- The board is very aware that Souhegan's cost per pupil is high. We have taken steps to reduce our cost per pupil, and will continue to address this over time, without sacrificing the quality of education our students receive. Some of these steps include an analysis of Souhegan's facilities usage, continuing a review of the program of studies, reallocation of staff, co-curricular review, and the implementation of the SAU wide strategic plan.
- To date, we have reduced our cost per pupil by \$305 by eliminating 13.7 positions, closing one of our cafeterias, changing the budget review process, contract negotiations spanning a 4 year period that feature minimal to no cost of living increases, reduced prescription benefits, higher health deductibles, and incentivizing lower cost health plans.
- Souhegan's decrease in enrollment and corresponding increase in cost per pupil is not an anomaly, but is right in line with the enrollment and cost per pupil state averages (2008 - 2014).
- In fact, Souhegan is one of the few schools that has recently been successful in reducing cost per pupil, something other districts are finding difficult to achieve.
- Souhegan's enrollment has actually increased by 4 % over the last 2 years. During that time, the budget decreased by 2.85% the first year, and increased by only 1.22% the second year. Souhegan is not slated to see another major drop in enrollment until FY18.
- Cost per pupil values alone are not an adequate way to compare the cost of education, or it's impact on taxes from district to district. Some elements affecting a tax rate which are not reflected in a cost per pupil include capital and bond debt that a district may incur by building a new school or athletic facilities, for example.
- A reduction of 24 students (or 2.86% of enrollment) over four grade levels does not allow for the elimination of positions, or the ability to buy 24 fewer books or other supplies. 2.86% fewer students does not mean we receive a 2.86% reduction in transportation contracts or other contractual obligations, or the reduction of fixed costs such as gas or electric.

Other key points:

- Souhegan's current operating budget, as well as the FY16 proposed budget are lower than our FY11 budget by 1% and .7 % respectively
- The proposed FY16 budget has an increase of 0.21 % (\$37,845), mainly due to a 27% (\$46,639) increase in our transportation contract, and a 10 % (\$97,325) increase in retirement costs as the state continues to shift this burden to the local level. As Board members, we are charged with the delicate balance of ensuring our students get the quality education they deserve and that our community expects, at a cost that is affordable and acceptable to all of our stakeholders. That is not an easy job. A lot of research, thought, analysis and angst occurs before presenting a final budget.

However, as taxpayers ourselves, we understand that no matter how responsible a budget is, people want to understand the value they are getting for their money. After all, the quality and value of our schools is a major factor in keeping property values up and attracting new residents to our towns. We have a lot to share in our next letter with regards to value.

*Respectfully submitted,
Souhegan Cooperative School Board
Mary Lou Mullens, Chair
Fran Harrow, Vice Chair
Steve Coughlan
Pim Grondstra
Fran Harrow
Chris Janson
Peter Maresco*

Amherst Needs Votes for Education

To the editor:

Several Warrant Articles on the March 10, 2015 ballot relate to education, including operating budgets and Article 13, which will expand kindergarten to a full day program like already exists for Grades 1 through 12. These are investments essential for our town. In making them, we best ensure our collective strength and longevity.

Amherst is principally a residential, family-oriented town with only a modicum of industrial and commercial tax base. As a result, we rely on attracting families to keep our home values stable. In order to attract families, we make investments in residential-oriented features, such as infrastructure and education.

Education has been a hallmark of our history. The return on those past investments in education has kept Amherst in the top tier of school districts in the state (Souhegan High School is in the top five statewide). When my family was looking for a community, Amherst only made the shortlist because of its solid reputation for academic excellence. Other families looking for new homes are undoubtedly of a similar mind.

The current Warrant Articles on education continue in that tradition and help Amherst stay competitive in attracting families, which in turn stabilizes (if not increases) our property values and bolsters our tax base. The expansion of kindergarten to full day, for example, places Amherst in the unique position of being the only highly reputable school district in our region to offer such a program; similar programs in Bedford and Hollis are limited and do not include all students.

The full-day kindergarten program is attractive to families because it gives our young students the time they need to flourish both academically and socially. This is especially true given increasing academic standards; indeed, kindergarten is the new first grade. Simply put, more hours in the school will give our students the time they need to practice and hone skills critical for future success as adults in a more highly competitive global marketplace.

See www.sau39.org and www.amherst-full-day-k.org for more information, including evidence of the diligence and seriousness our school representatives have exhibited during the process of formulating the current Warrant Articles. In conclusion, I strongly urge all Amherst voters to come to the polls on March 10th and vote YES for education.

*John Glover
Amherst*

**Next Issue is Thursday, March 5th.
Deadline for letters is Friday Noon, February 27**

A Vision for Souhegan HS

To the editor:

When planning for Souhegan H.S. began 25 years ago, the school board made a calculated decision by selecting Bob Mackin as the founding principal. He brought a new concept of a school from the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). Those of us who participated in the founding committees felt invigorated by the concept. We worked tirelessly to put together a school that made us proud. The new administration and the school board took risks with this new concept. Battles were fought over some of the innovative proposals. However, there were innovations that seemed to differentiate Souhegan from other schools. These innovations included advisory, inclusion, senior project, community council, teacher-as-coach, team projects, and collaboration – among many others. These risks were not small. Today, many people take these innovations for granted. Many other schools have adopted these concepts. New approaches to education have been developed and have proven successful. CES at Souhegan is 23 years old and deserves to be refreshed to deliver a 21st century education.

If I am elected to the School Board, there are two areas on which I will focus my efforts. The first is best management practices that can deliver a high-quality education at an affordable cost and the second is enhancing CES with continuous innovation in education. Among the best management practices that I have already brought forward are:

- 360 degree review concept - in addition to student, peer teacher, and administration input, feedback will include opportunity for parents to provide input to staff evaluations.
- Developing a salary and total compensation survey for all Souhegan staff that compares with surrounding and competitive schools.
- Reviewing and adjusting, where needed, the various lengths of contracts and compensation for administrative staff.

New areas where I believe best practices can be deployed are:

- Personnel issues related to staffing; work to provide soft landings where economically possible.
- Managing the long term uses of the physical plant, including the annex, in the era of declining enrollment.

To secure a long lasting future, this vision includes:

- A quality innovative school that puts students first; exceptional at many levels including academic, developing the whole person, and preparing them to compete throughout their lifetimes.
- Continuing the core values of the CES, but integrating modern educational technology and new practices.
- Bring in new learning concepts and technology to reduce the emphasis on student teacher ratio as the only way of providing individualized learning.
- Explore and adopt new technologies such as www.knewton.com, to focus on adaptive learning for individuals. LETTERS.doc; let's go beyond the "bring your own device" strategy to offer a true adaptive learning platform for the entire student body.
- There are many technologies that can enable us to bring down costs and improve educational quality at the same time.
- Balancing the quality and cost of education.

Strategic visions are, by nature, a work in progress. They are and should be modified based on changing events and conditions. We can continue to work collectively to make Souhegan an innovative institution structured around continuous improvement. And, I believe we can do so while lowering the tax burden on Amherst citizens.

I have a history of dedication to the school over the years. And, I will bring my creativity, commitment to quality and innovation, and considerable management expertise to contribute to this vision of Souhegan HS in the coming years. If you share this vision and desire for a high-quality and cost effective education for every high-school student, please vote for me. Thanks you.

*Respectfully,
David Chen, Candidate
for Souhegan School Board
Amherst*

Why Amherst Schools Need Full-Day Kindergarten

To the editor:

As the principal of Clark-Wilkins Elementary School, I would like to share with the Amherst community the reasons that make "now" the right time to implement full-day kindergarten in Amherst for ALL incoming students.

Our students need additional time to:

- Practice and internalize academic and social skills.
- Interact with peers and teachers.
- Engage in activities that connect with music, art, and movement education.
- Participate in small group and individualized instruction.
- Develop stronger connections with students, teachers, and service providers.
- Address the developmental needs of the whole child.

Our teachers need additional time to:

- Help students develop the emergent reading and fluency skills needed for academic success.
- Support students in meeting the increased reading expectations and levels for Kindergarten.
- Engage students in meeting the increased expectations in mathematics, such as counting to 100 and understanding the place value concepts of ones and tens.
- Instruct students in the standards and expectations of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in literacy and mathematics
- Guide and instruct students in expected social skill and problem-solving strategies.
- Develop relationships and a strong home and school connection with all families.

By offering a full-day program to all Kindergarten students we can ensure equity in the delivery of instruction, programming, and services. If we compare our current Kindergarten program to the offerings of public and private schools across the USA, we will note that approximately 73% of students attend a full-day Kindergarten program. To place our students on an even playing field with their peers, we need to extend our current half-day to a full-day program. Since the state has waived the requirement to expand any existing classrooms to the larger square footage required of Kindergarten classes, we can comfortably fit all of our projected incoming Kindergarten students into current classroom spaces at Clark School for the upcoming school year. This waiver allowed us to cut over \$120,000 from the proposal to implement full-day Kindergarten.

The expectations placed on students and teachers have changed over the decades. The current expectations for Kindergarten students match what were the expectations for first grade students not more than five years ago. The demands and expectations for our first, second, third, and fourth graders have also increased. These increased expectations continue into middle school and through high school. Simply put, our teachers and students cannot accomplish everything they need to accomplish within the time constraints of a half-day program. All of our incoming students need full-day Kindergarten.

*Sincerely,
Gerard J. St. Amand, Principal
Clark-Wilkins Elementary School*

Supporting David Chen

To the editor:

I was shocked to learn that Amherst has the highest per student cost in the state at \$19,000 and yet the proficiency in 11th grade is around 58%. Not much bang for our bucks. And, enrollment is steadily declining! I am a Senior and am tired, over the years, of school systems constantly crying for more money with no accountability. I am voting NO on the school budget and am voting for David Chen for school board. He has researched this discrepancy in Amherst schools and has solutions. Maybe if enough of us "put our foot down" on the ballot in March the school budget will be more realistic. I don't mind paying school taxes but let's get our money's worth.

*Susan Herceg
Amherst*

The Education Frontier

To the editor:

This newspaper, national newspapers, politicians, and educators around the country - and the world - are discussing reform and innovation in education today. You can find the debates everywhere and on all levels of the educational process: K-12, higher ed, corporate learning. The challenge when discussing education reform is that the values (let's do what is good for our kids, let's do what is right for our society), the data (this works well, this doesn't), and the actions (let's do this, or that) don't always connect. What works in one environment doesn't in another. One solution countermands another. Some excellent and proven approaches are undercut by well-intended laws. It is a nested problem.

As our town wrestles with how to shape education in our community, I write to offer insight on the small part of this nested problem I know well. I know what is coming. My professional focus is in applied neuroeducation, also known as educational neuroscience. This is a relatively new field that fuses data from psychology, neuroscience, and pedagogy with technology to research, enhance, and create adaptive learning. Take a look at how the website Amazon.com appears on your smartphone v. your computer. That's device-responsive technology. I create learning curricula that respond to cognition areas in the brain in the same way.

This adaptive learning is not just for the classroom. In fact, there is huge demand for adaptive learning programs in business. I spend a lot of my time developing these plans for Fortune 500 companies. The children that attend Souhegan and Amherst schools can expect to work in companies where their skills have to be significantly updated almost annually. Part of the push for brain-adaptive learning is so people can learn quickly, and learn more, because they are always going to be learning. The rate of innovation is so fast, it is no longer feasible for companies to hire people with new or necessary skills (like coding in certain software): employees will be learning skills throughout their career that haven't been conceived of today. And while there are all sorts of trendy "brain myths" out there, the research on how to institute this accelerated, rapid learning is fairly conclusive: it's a blend of in-person teaching, brain-adaptive curricula, and online supplementation that is constantly rescaled to the individual person's proximal level of knowledge on the topic.

If that sounds exhausting, and overwhelming, it is. There are many implications - social, cultural, and psychological - from this accelerated learning. There are also many advantages, among them the fact that therapy for children with learning challenges will be far cheaper, more effective, and more measurable. Learning style differences - are you an audio or visual learner? - as well as choosing between learning approaches - Singapore math, phonics-based reading - will be rendered moot. There are also cost reductions and shifts to manage, as many of these changes make traditional textbooks, expensive curricula, and supplemental materials cheaper or unnecessary.

Applied neuroeducation is not just a research field in its theoretical phase. In 2013, the venture capital/investment community put \$1.25 billion dollars into education technology innovation. In 2014, they invested an additional \$1.55 billion. That's almost three billion dollars in two years. To put this in context, that level of investment is similar to what happened in the mid-to-late 1990s in the dot com industry. That's where education sits now, two to three years out from a revolution, whether we are ready for it or not. This area is innovating so fast, the buzz words you may hear or read about today - MOOCs, e-learning, Khan Academy - are already a generation behind.

This is the professional world our children will work in. This is the level of performance they will be expected to generate. How we walk back to that in terms of a high school curriculum that prepares for this world is another question. But I think it important to recognize where education is headed, and that whomever we elect to the Souhegan School Board, or any of our school boards, has to be willing to own this reality, plan for it, and lead to it, even as we adjust to declining enrollment numbers and changing demographics. By and large, I have always found that teachers and education administrators want to innovate and embrace change, but such initiative has to come from the Board and the larger community to be effective.

The irony of the innovations I see on a daily basis is that they do not require more money to implement. But they do require vision, imagination, a desire to learn, and a willingness to be challenged. It is because of this that I will be voting for David Chen for the Souhegan school board position. In listening to David speak (<http://tinyurl.com/talkamherst> at 1:49), reviewing his ideas and notes on his Facebook page, and talking to him, I believe he has the abilities and experience to lead in this way. Most of all, he is willing to ask the hard questions that will drive innovation, efficiency, and creativity in our schools. I want Amherst schools to succeed in this changing world. I believe David is the right person to help us do so.

*Respectfully,
Amanda Jensen
Amherst*

Unfunded Mandates Impact Amherst School District Budget

To the editor:

Mindful of all Amherst taxpayers' desire to see ongoing cuts that reflect declining enrollment, we have presented a decreasing budget to the voters over the past two years. As we have attempted every year, we are pleased to have cut costs once again. In fact, the cuts exceed \$700,000 in expenditures in the current budget proposal. Despite these cuts, our budget is up 1.24%.

The FY16 Amherst School District budget drivers include over \$1,000,000 in under-funded state and federal mandates in Special Education costs, increases in NH Retirement, and contractual obligations. Despite over a million dollars in increases, we've controlled the budget increase to \$306,000 due to a decrease of \$700K in spending.

Last year, we received unanticipated money from our insurance provider along with more tuition from Mont Vernon than was expected. This resulted in an unreserved fund balance of over \$900,000 (a revenue anomaly) which was returned to the taxpayers this past fall. Because we didn't receive this again, it translates into a revenue loss of over \$400,000 this year thus causing an increase in the Amherst School District portion of the tax rate.

In FY16, we will continue to examine ways to lower costs while providing an exceptional education to all of our students within the Amherst School District.

*Sincerely,
Amherst School Board
Lucienne Foulks (Chair)
Peg Bennett
Amy Facey
Jim Manning
Paul Prescott*