

To: RSU #4 School Board
From: Jim Hodgkin
RE: K-8 Reconfiguration recommendation
Date: December 15, 2009

I have given the matter of reconfiguring our three K-8 schools a great deal of thought over the past month or more. I have tried to provide the Board with information about this issue as it has come to me. I have decided that the best thing for me to do as your Superintendent is to put together my recommendation and to support that recommendation with a rationale. It is not my intent to tell you what to do about this very challenging and emotional decision. Instead, I believe it is my responsibility to provide you with a recommendation and rationale from which you can work. You may or may not find my recommendation acceptable. You may modify it or throw it out altogether. That is your business. I feel that I owe it to all of you to provide some guidance. I know that I did this somewhat in a previous document. However, I have received more information since then and I have had many more conversations. So here goes.

1. What are the priorities in making the decision about the loss of state revenue? I have identified four priorities related to the loss of state revenues. These are in priority order.

- A. We cannot pass the loss of revenue on to the taxpayers.
- B. We need to reconfigure our 6-8 educational program.
- C. We need to save a great deal of money in a short period of time.
- D. We need to maintain all of our programs in order to ensure that RSU #4 students get the same opportunities that students in other schools get.

Rationale: It is abundantly clear that the taxpayers of RSU #4 do not have the ability to absorb the loss of revenue from the state, so I believe that it is absolutely our top priority and the most important priority that we share with our constituents. All other conversations feed off this priority. If we were in a different economic situation or if we had a different tax base, this might not be the top priority, but it is clearly the reality in our communities. I have my opinions about what the best solution might be regarding the loss of revenues, but what is most important to me is that we take this opportunity to create a 6-8 middle school and save a great deal of money in doing so. The development of a 6-8 middle school for the RSU is the single most important educational decision that we can make to improve the overall quality and continuity of our educational program. The list of reasons why this is true is long, but includes a broad understanding of the developmental needs of children at this age. In short, I strongly believe that our high school will continuously struggle as long as the first time our three towns come together is in the 9th grade. Related to this priority is the fact that the only way to create a 6-8 middle school is to restructure grades 3-5 as there is not a building that could house the 6-8 grades without displacing other grades. I believe that the development of a 3-5 intermediate school would also benefit the RSU. The fourth priority (D) is based upon my belief that our students are as important as any other students anywhere and the fact that I know that programs that are cut are very hard to recover.

2. What reconfiguration plan makes the most sense? My opinion is the plan I refer to as “Jim’s Compromise.” I prefer this plan to the Principal’s Plan because it does two things that I think are really important and happen to match up nicely with the four priorities that I outlined. First, it doesn’t pass the revenue reduction on to the taxpayers, it creates the 6-8 middle school, it realizes just over \$685,000 the first year, which is more than the expected \$600,000 reduction, and it maintains all of our present programs. Second, and more important to me, it buys us time to really look at the possibility of closing a school, either Libby-Tozier or Wales Central. A separate consideration with this option is that it could spread the potential savings over the two years when we are expected to lose money. Ironically, the potential savings could come close to matching the projected revenue losses from the state. Specifically, in year one (2010-11), we are anticipating losing around \$600,000 from the state and this plan saves around \$685,000. In year two (2011-12), we are anticipating losing around \$300,000 from the state and closing a school in that year would save an additional \$250,000-\$300,000 depending on which school was closed.

Regardless of which school would be considered for closing, I would strongly encourage the Board to make the decision to change the K-8 configuration to include a 3-5 intermediate school and a 6-8 middle school.

I believe we have an opportunity to save the RSU #4 taxpayers nearly \$900,000 while dramatically improving the overall quality of our educational system and maintaining all of our programs.

There are two obvious downsides to this proposal and any proposal that will displace children from their town. First, is the loss of a school, whether it is Wales Central or Libby-Tozier. For Wales, in particular, the loss of the school would mean the loss of a community center that houses more than just a school. Community and other groups involving children use the school for non-school related activities. The second downside is the increased time that students would be on busses being transported to schools. While there is no doubt that students would be subjected to longer bus rides, this is the reality for the majority of students in Maine and for many students in districts that surround RSU #4. Geographically, we are not that large. At the extremes, the town lines are between 12-15 miles from any school that students would be transported to. While this is further than any K-8 commute presently, it is not uncommon in most communities in Maine.

3. What other questions or considerations have been discussed?

- A. *Which school is in better physical shape, Libby-Tozier or Wales Central?* I invited the Maintenance/Transportation supervisor from RSU #10 to tour the two schools to address that question. In addition, we reviewed information about the history of both schools that we had in our office.
 - a. Regarding the opinion of the Supervisor from RSU #10, he concluded that there is no appreciable difference between the two schools from a structural standpoint.
 1. It is quite obvious that Libby-Tozier has been maintained better.

2. Libby-Tozier was originally built in 1952 and Wales Central was built in 1951.
3. Libby-Tozier has the alarm system issue that will cost the taxpayers approximately \$90,000.
4. The Wales School would require some renovations to prepare it to be a K-2 only school. We have no estimate of what that cost would be.
5. The Wales School has two boilers and Libby Tozier has one.
6. Even with renovations, Libby-Tozier does have more space.

B. Which school is more conducive to a middle school concept - Carrie Ricker or Sabattus Central School? Since that topic has come up, I have received feedback from both schools regarding which school is best to become a middle school. As with the previous question, I do not believe there is a clear answer. Both schools could be the middle school. For me, I would choose the Sabattus Central School as the middle school. My reason would be that I believe that the Carrie Ricker School would be a better 3-5 school as I would prefer to bus 3-5 students to the most centrally located school, which would be the Carrie Ricker school. That doesn't answer which of the two is better suited to be a middle school, but it does provide a rationale for choosing one.

Here are the considerations that have been sent to me regarding this question. These are not my opinion, just information I have received:

In Support of SCS becoming the RSU #4 middle school:

1. Sabattus Central School was built to accommodate middle-level students.
2. SCS has 21 available classrooms. 16 classrooms will be used to house grades 6-8. There is room to house all middle-level special education programs and for future expansion.
3. SCS has a library classroom connected to the library. This allows for middle-level library/media classes within range of our collection.
4. SCS also has a hands-on project room that allows for middle-level projects.
5. SCS has wider corridors than Carrie Ricker.
6. The SCS sinks, counters tops, and lockers were built at a uniform height that is suited to taller students. Our current 3rd-5th graders often use stools when using these fixtures.

7. Both SCS and CR have large gyms well suitable for middle level PE and sports.
8. The SCS stage opens to the gym and/or the cafeteria allowing use for variety of events.
9. SCS has a camera system that allows administration to view the activity in each corridor and the playground.
10. SCS currently houses 9 of the 16 grade 6-8 classes.
11. SCS has done a lot of work toward becoming a middle school. SCS already has an advisee/advisor system in place, and anti-bullying/leadership program that starts in grade 6, 6-8 block scheduling, a 6-8 Civil Rights Team, as well as grade-level teams, and a grades 6-8 Reach Program, Jobs for Maine Grads.
12. SCS already hosts a Day Treatment Program for the RSU which services middle school students.
13. SCS has two large athletic fields and an outside double basketball court. The school also has additional property that could be developed at a later date.
14. SCS' start time (8:25 A.M.) is more conducive to middle school students developmentally.

In Support of SCS becoming the RSU #4 middle school:

1. Carrie Ricker has a significant amount of hand tools that were purchased for a technology program that hasn't been implemented. Best guess is about \$12,000 worth of tools.
2. Carrie Ricker was built as a middle school. Programs like Tech. Ed. and Home Ec. (now Family and Consumer Science) were intended to be part of that program and rooms were developed for that purpose.
3. There is ample and adequate space to house the 6-8 program.
4. The fields at Carrie Ricker are considered better than SCS fields.
5. Carrie Ricker has an acoustically designed music room.
6. The Art room has a kiln equipped already.

C. Are there changes/savings in the area of Co-Curricular/Extra-Curricular offerings that would result from creating a 6-8 middle school? There would be some dramatic changes that would be realized from creating a middle school. Presently, each school has there own Co-Curricular and Extra-Curricular offerings. One middle school would reduce that number to one. That would mean a reduction of stipends from each building. I also believe we would want to consolidate the Athletic Directors to be one AD for grades 6-12. This would

allow for a more coordinated program 6-12 and a savings to the RSU. There may be some additional costs to consider as a philosophy is adopted regarding “No cuts” or intramural programming.

- D. Are there other benefits that would be realized from creating a 3-5 school and a 6-8 school?* There are huge educational benefits from creating these educational structures. Teachers have greater opportunity to share information, best practice, coordinate all things related to the education of students including curriculum and assessment, and much more. In addition, we can virtually eliminate the inequities of programming that exist presently. All students could receive GT services and all 6-8 graders could receive Foreign Language. Having all the grade level teachers in the same building will provide greater opportunities to provide Professional Development and other opportunities to work together that presently requires staff to do this work after school or take time away from their classrooms.
- E. With all this focus and savings coming from K-8, are there areas that should be cut as well?* I have heard people discussing the need to make cuts in Administration and at the high school. While I feel it is our responsibility to look at all areas, I would just want to caution everyone not to make cuts in other areas just to be “equitable.” Decisions about cutting need to be based upon a decision to discontinue something or an inability to afford something. In considering any cuts, a discussion about what work will be discontinued or how the work will get done must happen. I agree with the Principal’s Plan with respect to school Administrators. I would be very concerned about making any cuts to school level personnel in the first year of a major change. I foresee that cuts could be made in year two or three, but not in year one. If people are considering cuts to Central Office Administration, just remember I have been telling you since I came on board that I believe we are already running below what I would recommend we should have for a district our size. The only reasonable reduction I am suggesting is in the area of Athletic Administration.
- F. Is there a way to keep an elementary school open in each town and why would we want to keep a school open in each town?* I have heard that question asked several times and the simple answer is “yes.” The School Board certainly has that option included in the proposals that I presented. The “Wales Plan” and the “Keeping K-5 students in Wales Plan” both do that. “Jim’s Compromise” could do that as well. When I met with the Wales’ selectmen, they shared that they would prefer a plan that keeps an elementary building in each town, even if it is K-2. They thought it was prudent to keep the Wales school open at least until Wales has a better handle of growth for that town from the Turnpike interchange. In my meeting with them, they shared that plans for housing development have already been approved. Of course, no one knows if those houses will sell or who would live there even if they do sell.

G. *Other considerations:* A quick look at a map of our district showed the Maintenance/Transportation Director from RSU #10 that keeping the Wales School open as a K-2 school for Litchfield and Wales would result in additional transportation costs for the RSU. Exactly how much more couldn't be calculated as the routes would have to be developed. However, he shared that the other five schools line up nicely on the map which would allow students to be transported to a specific location and then reduce the number of busses that would have to take students to other schools. There is possibly additional costs by keeping Wales open in any capacity, but not as much of an impact if Litchfield students are not transported there.