

CHS VT BOARD OF ADVISORS STATEMENT TO THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE, FEB. 18, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

We are speaking today on behalf of the Advisory Board of the Community High School of Vermont. The Board is composed of Vermonters appointed by the Governor to serve as a community liaison and advocate for the Community High School and its students. The Advisory Board is also charged with advising the staff with regard to the formation of policy affecting the High School. In that role we are here today to express our concern over the proposed budget reduction of \$755,000 achieved by eliminating the field sites of the high school, and to alert you to the consequences that could follow from such a reduction;

TO PROCEED WITH THE REDUCTION, VERMONT LAW WOULD NEED TO BE CHANGED:

The 10 field sites serve the CHS students who are on parole or probation, and so the students are still under the supervision of the Department of Corrections. Their education remains the legal responsibility of the Community High School until they are released from the custody of the Department of Corrections. We have been advised that eliminating the field sites would create the necessity of first changing the Vermont statutes that govern the CHSVT and other independent high schools. The mission of CHS VT would need to be redefined and supported by the Vermont Department of Education and the Department of Corrections.

IMPACT ON CHSVT STUDENTS

The proposed elimination of the field sites would abruptly end the education of those students who have began their studies while incarcerated. What will become of these students? Most are impoverished and could not afford to continue their education elsewhere. They lack a car for transportation.. Most have had terrible experiences with traditional education. They have little capacity for focused attention, and low self esteem as to their ability to succeed academically. They need the continuing encouragement of their instructors and the continuity of instruction that they have already started. They are not like the traditional adult student who is motivated to take a course for enrichment or enhance their resume for better job prospects. There are constraints on their time, on their access to computers, their associations, their housing and even their travelling. CHS is structured to accommodate those students on Probation in ways that more traditional education programs simply are not.

Furthermore, many of the inmates in our prisons will become eligible for Probation after serving part of their sentence while incarcerated. Eliminating educational opportunity to those on probation is contrary to the goal of CHSVT of providing these students with a complete program of academic and work readiness education. The students would be faced with the choice of abandoning their studies for the relative freedom of Probation, or choosing to reject the offer of Probation to serve out the remainder of their sentence in prison so that they could complete their education. We believe that this is an unreasonable expectation that defeats the purpose of providing this population with a high school education and job skills needed to make a successful re-entry into society.

IMPACT ON THE HIGH SCHOOL AS AN ACCREDITED EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

The Community High School is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and by the Vermont Department of Education. Accreditation is obtained by extensive review of the programs, curriculum, staff qualifications and funding resources of the institution. This rigorous review is to determine whether or not the institution meets nationally recognized educational standards.

The High School's accreditation is essential for the students to gain admission to colleges or universities, for meeting industry standards of work readiness, and even for enlistment in the US Armed Forces. Without accreditation the credits earned will not transfer to other institutions or be accepted as reliable measures of academic achievement. Were the High School found in default due to underfunding or the abrupt termination of students seeking to graduate, the consequence of NEASC suspension or probation would jeopardize the whole program of the High School.

IMPACT ON THE STAFF OF CHS VT.

We must also recognize the impact on our teaching staff and administration. Attracting qualified personnel in a field of education which requires extra skill and performance to engage underperforming students in a prison based program is challenging enough without the impression that the school is being down sized and underfunded. The CHSVT needs a committed staff who can count on the State supporting the program at a level sufficient for them to achieve the best possible results for their students.

IMPACT OF PRIOR FUNDING REDUCTIONS:

Our budgetary concern is not new. The School has been subject to repeated budget reductions in prior years. Nine teaching positions were eliminated and the program on Welding was ended in the past few years. We have called attention to this problem of funding reductions last year when a major restructuring of the High School was put forward. The Legislature decided to avoid such a massive and unpredictable change. Yet if the High School continues to be targeted for future reductions, then the question arises as to whether the School and its mission are still valued by the Legislature as the one proven means in Vermont of helping to reduce recidivism. It is the opinion of the Board that we have reached the point where further cuts will undermine the viability of the remaining program. The consequences must be considered before going further in this direction. The reductions in past years have reduced the operating budget to the bare bone minimum. Now we are looking at amputations and whether or not the School can survive and serve its original purpose..

CHSVT IS A GOOD INVESTMENT

The present CHS program is recognized by national professionals in Corrections Education as one of the best. National research studies support the conclusion that providing education to inmates reduces the rate of recidivism and brings about a cost savings to the States who support this educational endeavor. Some States even invest more so that inmates are able to earn a Community College degree. Instead of shrinking the budget for the High School we urge that the Legislature move toward investing in the future of its inmate population. Since the average cost of incarcerating someone is about \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year, making it possible for a former inmate to find work and housing and enough financial security so that their life is not a continual struggle to survive in poverty would seem a worthwhile investment to make the first time they are incarcerated. If the CHS VT is valued and respected in Vermont and beyond, why fix what isn't broken?

OUR RECOMMENDATION:

The Advisory Board respectfully requests that the funding to the Community High School be restored and the field sites be continued for the coming fiscal year, and if the Legislature intends to make such radical changes in the future, that appropriate preparations for those changes be made well in advance of the adoption of the State budget.

Thanking you for your attention to our concerns.

Daniel P. Alcorn, President and

MEMBERS OF THE ADVISORY BOARD OF THE COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL OF VERMONT