

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

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 community liaisons and advocates for the Community High School and its students. In that role we are here today to express our concern for the proposed budget reduction of \$755,000 achieved by eliminating the field sites of the high school. These field sites serve the students who are on parole or probation and so are still under the supervision of the Department of Corrections. The High School coordinates the ongoing instruction of these students within the supervisory requirements of the DOC, which are driven by such considerations as security, mandatory supervision of parole officers and case workers, and numerous behavioral requirements expected of parolee and probationers. Additionally, there are limited site locations, multiple prison facilities in distant locations, limitations on student access to distance learning, limitations in terms of a population that often lacks a means of transportation, frequent absences due to required appointments with case workers or parole officers, and the poverty of nearly all students who have been paroled or put on probation. Our students are not traditional adult learners who have many more options when it comes to continuing their education. CHS VT understands the difficulties these students face and seeks to adjust programming wherever possible to assist them continue their education.

The members of the Advisory Board are concerned about the proposed elimination of the field sites since this will abruptly end the education of those students who began their studies while incarcerated. It should be noted that many of these students were drop outs or suspended from traditional high school programs. The Community High School has built a relationship with these students, in spite of their prior academic failures. That program includes assessment of their prior learning experiences, evaluation of their academic records and competencies, appropriate level academic instruction and in addition, training in job skills matched to the requirements of specific industry certificates. In addition to academics and work readiness, the High School teaches "Habits of Mind," a program that encourages self awareness of those attitudes and emotional triggers that lead to self defeating behaviors and low self esteem. This comprehensive program of instruction aims at helping the student address those needs and problems that led to failure in the traditional education system and gives the student the preparation for a successful re-entry when released back into the community. The Advisory Board is concerned that the proposed budget reduction will jeopardize the success of the CHSVT students once they leave the prisons.

Our 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 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. The reductions in past years have eliminated what little fat there was to be found in the program. Now we are looking at amputations and whether or not the School can survive and serve its original purpose..

As a Board we believe it is our duty to inform the Legislature of these unintended consequences that may follow upon an unconsidered change in the funding resources of the Community High School. If the Legislature still believes that such a change is in order, then we request that it be undertaken only after a thorough evaluation of the impacts on the students and the institution have been made, new goals and plans be made for the School, and attorneys are consulted regarding the statutory changes in needed in Vermont law to implement the proposed changes.

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 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?

The Advisory Board respectfully requests that the funding to the Community High School be restored and the field sites be continued.