

Tuesday, November 6, 2007

To Editor:

For the past 10 months, there has been much public discussion focused on the efforts of the RISE Task Force. During this period, the Board and Superintendent have focused primarily on the important work of delivering a high quality education to every student in every classroom in the District. Our decision to develop a magnet program at New Lebanon School, one of the RISE Task Force's recommended options, is a continuation of this effort to improve academic achievement in our schools. The Board's charge to the RISE Task Force was to recommend options that would improve academic achievement while addressing the issues of facilities utilization, projected declining enrollment, and to provide a means for a good faith effort to respond to our lack of compliance with the State's racial balance statute at New Lebanon. The development of a magnet school program will allow for the choice of a program to be targeted to the needs of the New Lebanon community, to provide for sustained academic improvement, and to offer open seats to other Greenwich students who live outside the immediate neighborhood attendance area.

Through the RISE Task Force's work, the Board of Education made the following findings: 1) the Greenwich community supports the neighborhood school concept; 2) closing an elementary school is not possible, as it would result in either higher class sizes or significant revisions to established academic programs; 3) the magnet school concept has worked well in Greenwich in attracting students to the International School at Dundee, Julian Curtiss School, and has a promising start at Hamilton Avenue School; and 4) changes in the District should be made in careful, incremental steps to assure that training and academic improvements would be maximized, and that disruption and transportation costs would be minimized.

Board members have received a number of questions from community members regarding the impact of the recent Supreme Court decision on the validity of the State Statute and Greenwich's obligation to comply. The Board of Education sought legal opinions and direction from the State regarding this issue. We have been told that the State Statute is still valid and will be enforced. Our legal advisors have told us that the Supreme Court decision addresses the means by which decisions are made to assign students to schools, specifically that it is unconstitutional for individuals to be assigned to a school solely based on their race. In Greenwich, we have never used race as the sole criterion for school assignment, even when striving for racial balance in the schools. We have always determined the assignment based on geographic preferences. According to the legal advice, the Board must continue to make a good faith effort to racially balance its schools and can continue using the methods we currently employ.

Greenwich has a successful record with its three magnet schools. The International School at Dundee was formed to voluntarily attract students to the facility when it re-opened due to overcrowding at Old Greenwich School and Riverside School; Hamilton Avenue School was also cited for racial imbalance by the State, and its Renaissance magnet program was developed to attract other students as well as to provide strategies to address achievement gap issues; and the Julian Curtiss School of World Languages was formed to provide a magnet option in the central part of Greenwich as well as to adjust impending racial imbalance. The model that Greenwich has developed for magnet schools is a "partial magnet" model, which retains students from its neighborhood attendance area, and attracts Greenwich students from other elementary

schools to available seats. Incremental costs for the three elementary magnet schools are less than ½ of 1% of the total budget, and the academic successes of their educational programs are documented.

In addition to its decision to develop a magnet program at New Lebanon School, the Board of Education moved to give more options to under-performing students in the District. The Board of Education approved a model of limited open choice that would allow elementary school students who are not achieving at the proficient level on standardized tests after at least two years in their school to opt for available seats in other non-magnet schools. While this is not expected to create significant movement within the District, it supports the effort in the District of improving academic achievement of ALL students by providing options for students who are under-performing.

The Board of Education would like to acknowledge the work of the RISE Task Force, which was to look at complex issues in a public, transparent, and representative way. While keeping in the mind the Board's goal to first and foremost improve education in Greenwich, the Task Force was asked to consider a myriad of data on facilities utilization, enrollment projections, magnet school models and racial imbalance. The Task Force was asked to provide long-term, flexible solutions while considering a wide variety of approaches. The Task Force's recommendations were fair and representative, and reflected a review process that narrowed the options to those that would best suit the values of the Greenwich community.

The Board made its choice from among the RISE Task Force's highest ranked options when it approved the plan to develop another partial magnet school at New Lebanon School. Offering a magnet school will allow the development of an academic program focused on achievement issues at New Lebanon, while utilizing its available extra seats for those attracted to the school by the program. The Board is confident that the addition of a fourth magnet school can be accomplished while still providing high quality programs at all of our schools, maintaining the neighborhood school environment, and meeting the needs of all the students. New Lebanon parents have participated in a number of opportunities to discuss magnet school options and are enthusiastic about an opportunity to develop its program to improve academic achievement at the school, which has traditionally lagged behind most of the other elementary schools. The Board of Education feels that it has retained its focus on its highest priority of increasing student achievement in Greenwich by making a decision to enhance its program at New Lebanon School.

Respectfully submitted,  
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