

LETTER FROM THE FAYSTON BOARD TO THE HUUSD BOARD: 1-4-17

Dear Staff and Families,

The Fayston School Board has written to the HUUSD Board in an attempt to safeguard our teachers and capacity at Fayston School in the coming school year. The HUUSD budget discussions have swiftly moved off the Act 46 Committee's commitment to operate with a level service budget in year one to a proposal by the Superintendent to eliminate the on staff sub and two teachers at Fayston School. She has backed down to eliminating the on staff sub and one teacher, but the Board Chair is on board with this plan and other board members seem receptive as well. We are opposed to the HUUSD Board making any reductions in Fayston School staff at this time for a variety of reasons. They are expressed in the letter. It is lengthy, but we hope you will take the time to read it. If you share our concern and can come to upcoming HUUSD Board budget discussions, please do so. Meetings will be held January 4th and 18th at 6pm at the HUHS Library. Your presence and your voice matter. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to any Fayston School Board Member. We welcome your engagement.

Regards,

Heidi Spear
Fayston School Board Chair
m: 508.344.4959

December 29, 2016

To the HUUSD Board of Directors:

The Fayston School Board is writing to the HUUSD Board to advocate for budget decisions that honor commitments, serve the interests of students and taxpayers alike and do not make teacher cuts in advance of thorough consideration of strategy, equity, staffing models, differentiation and performance. We view the immediate staffing reductions proposed by our Superintendent to be ineffectual in the face of proposed budget increases, contrary to the interests of students at Fayston School and in direct contradiction to the commitments made to our voters by the Act 46 Committee and Superintendent Nease during the marketing of accelerated consolidation.

In its first months of operation, the HUUSD Board has been presented a level service budget but also an array of expenditure increases, many which do not directly support the education of our students, and several teacher cuts. The board has been entertaining these changes without development of a common vision, strategy or plan, common operational knowledge of our schools, consideration of revenues, and under advisement that the WWSU Central Office is unprepared and lacks the capacity to provide requested comparative analyses on resourcing or programming.

It is reasonable that we don't have thorough analysis to inform shifting investments and reductions at this time. The ramp of state tax breaks and the Act 46 Committee's commitment to sustain the status quo in our first year of operation recognized that would likely be the case. The Fayston Board asks that in this context the HUUSD Board recognize how nascent their authority is, the limits of its knowledge

and experience and the importance of honoring all communities' interests and goals during what is a very substantial change to school governance.

Fayston School entered into our unified district as an exceptionally high performing and efficient small school and a very desirable asset, though you would not imagine so from the conversations at your board meetings to date. Our Superintendent has characterized our schools as being excessively staffed, has suggested repeatedly that our budget should offend board members from other communities and that teacher cuts should be made immediately.

This is despite the fact that the Fayston School:

- In 2016-2017 has lower education spending per equalized pupil than all schools across our unified district but the Warren School's, while fulfilling common mandates and serving significantly smaller population than most.
- Has come to the unified district with no debt, a \$91,000 building maintenance reserve and no deferred maintenance.
- Has come to the unified union with a grandfathered Vermont Small Schools Grant of \$62,000 this year, which will increase if populations decline further, to subsidize the continued operation of our small school within a larger unified district.
- Is a high performing school, with strong educational outcomes and a healthy, supportive climate that is treasured by students and our community.
- Has demonstrated its appeal beyond our town lines with the largest net inflow of students (+5) of all schools in our choice survey.
- Has made deliberate decisions to reduce other expenditures and staff to sustain consistent, high-caliber teachers to meet the needs of routinely fluctuating populations.
- Has come to the union with one primary challenge and goal: to increase enrollment for the benefit of our student community!

Operating the Fayston School has been a challenge. Student populations have swung from 110 to 150 and with 5-10% fluctuations in any given year it is not easy to manage costs and ensure we consistently meet the needs of the students in the building. In the face of recent enrollment lows we have had to make hard decisions, cutting budget for instructional assistants, literacy specialists and enrichment, letting go of long-term, valued staff. In making cuts we have grappled with the challenges and realities of supporting Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) in a school as small as ours, and we have shifted responsibilities for Tier 2 supports from staff we had to cut to our regular education teachers. With smaller class sizes and a strong, consistent team of teachers, that seemed reasonable and preferable to inconsistent teaching staff. When our 1st and 2nd grade classes dipped to 9 and 10 last year, we combined those groups and leveraged the teacher that no longer had her own classroom to provide parallel grade-specific instruction and supplement Tier 2 math instruction across the school. We did this to retain her expertise and to provide consistency for students, because, as could readily be predicted, the cohort expanded this year and we needed 2 classes once again.

These are the realities of running the Fayston School. A black and white picture has been painted that suggests there is an expedient way to make teacher cuts with no downsides to education quality or the health of the Fayston School. This is patently false. Teachers that come and go are not good for students. Capping Fayston School capacity below what is desirable for cohorts or effective for multi-year classroom instruction is not good for students.

The Story Board that the Act 46 Committee used to sell accelerated consolidation to our community featured school choice prominently. As a mountain town with an increasing percentage of our housing occupied by second homeowners and seasonal visitors and very limited affordable housing, we recognized that enabling students beyond our town lines to attend our school was vital to our sustainability and our growth. If the Act 46 Committee and all our boards had not approved the implementation of school choice, we would not be a part of this unified district. Now we are confronted by the potential that the HUUSD Board will take immediate action to cut our teachers and limit our capacity, undermining both school choice and our potential to sustain or grow our enrollment.

Our Superintendent has characterized Fayston School's class sizes as an affront to equity and has asserted that they should be comparable to Thatcher Brook's, our largest school. Not only has the HUUSD Board not yet even considered equity broadly or established what substantial equity of opportunity requires, but fluctuating populations and the elimination of Tier 2 support staff at Fayston School make that goal untenable.

Fayston School came to this union with open eyes, understanding the challenges at other schools. We knew Moretown had exceptionally high education spending per pupil. We knew Warren had neglected its building and was going to take on a massive debt we would all be paying for. We knew Waitsfield was starting to experience the real estate constraints and sizable population swings that we have been struggling with for a good long while. We came with full intention to be team players and support the health of these schools and the needs of those communities. We are only asking for the same thing. We did not expect that this budget season would start with our Superintendent calling for 2 teachers to be cut at Fayston School, given her knowledge of our challenges and her direct communications to our town when marketing accelerated consolidation.

The Fayston School is an asset. It is an asset that your board can undermine or can leverage for current families across our unified district and to attract new families. Rather than rushing to cap capacity below what is good for students, we would argue that in developing a HUUSD strategy you should actually consider expanding investment in Fayston School to attract new families. Our school has the highest elevation in the state, feels nothing like a traditional school, has its own barn, has Mad River Path walking and biking trails right outside its door and prime skiing right up the hill. Investing in specializing this asset to serve those with particular interests in outdoor learning would be smart. In the meantime, allowing all our families to learn about and choose if they want their kids to attend Fayston School is the best way to support equity of opportunity. Small isn't for everyone, but it is the very best thing for some.

To date, at HUUSD Board meetings nothing has been discussed of the Fayston School beyond preliminary forecasts of classroom sizes for one year. Anyone empowered to make decisions that directly impact students and alter education delivery must take the time to understand the operational challenges and qualities of this exceptionally high-performing and efficient small school. The HUUSD Board is an entirely new venture, convened in September, shouldering a responsibility that heretofore was the responsibility of each community's elected leaders with much more knowledge of each community's school. In evaluating the proposal to cut teachers at the Fayston School, only 2 of the HUUSD's 14 board members have any working knowledge of or any operational exposure to the Fayston School, half have no small school governance experience, and several have no school governance experience at all.

We request that the HUUSD Board invest sufficient time to get familiar with the operation and results of the Fayston School and all schools before departing from level service budgets and cutting teachers.

We request that the HUUSD Board honor the Act 46 Committee's commitments not to rush in and overturn the status quo in advance of deeper evaluations of equity, efficiency and performance and development of an HUUSD vision, strategy and plan. We believe this is the path that best serves our students and our communities. We also believe that making immediate changes that ignore community challenges and priorities and reduce school investments without adequate information or deliberation will undermine the mission and credibility of the HUUSD Board, set a dangerous precedent for how future divisions are made and create divisions between board members and communities that must work effectively together— all for less than 2 tenths of 1 percent of the HUUSD budget.

We appreciate your taking the time to read our letter and we hope you will give due consideration to our school community's challenges, strengths and goals so that can truly end up stronger together. We welcome the opportunity to address any of your questions.

Respectfully,

Fayston School Board of Directors