

Letters & Opinion

US News and World Report Ranking of SHS

To the editor:

In the last issue of *The Amherst Citizen*, an article was written by the Souhegan Cooperative School Board to try to explain why we were not ranked as one of the top high schools in the State by *US News and World Report*.

The Board's article discusses why SHS "missed" one of the steps to even be considered for ranking: Step 2, about whether or not SHS disadvantaged students are outperforming disadvantaged students in the state. The Board's article states, Souhegan "fell short" in this category: "Our performance of disadvantaged students is below the state average and, therefore, Souhegan did not 'pass' Step 2." The article states the category WHERE we fell short, but not WHY we are below the state average. With the additional staff we have at SHS compared to neighboring schools, why are we failing our disadvantaged students?

The remainder of the article about Souhegan's ranking seems very subjective by continuing to say: "While Souhegan does not fall into the category eligible to be ranked, there are a number of schools in the top thirteen or close behind who do not perform as well as Souhegan. Six out of the thirteen top ranked NH schools have equal or lower math scores than Souhegan [this also means seven out of thirteen have HIGHER math scores, putting us slightly less than average of the top 13 schools]. Five out of the thirteen have lower scores than Souhegan in reading [that means eight out of thirteen have HIGHER reading scores making us less than this average]. Nine of the top thirteen have lower college readiness scores than Souhegan."

As the only quantitative measure available to us, even the mean NECAP scores for the previous five years show SHS to be lower than Bedford and Hollis-Brookline in Reading, Math, Writing, and Science; and lower than the State average in Math, Writing, and Science. My opinion is that we should be performing a lot better than that which is mentioned above considering the amount of tax dollars we're spending on our School. Compare this with other towns: for example, our high school cost per student is 72% HIGHER than Bedford, and 50% HIGHER than Hollis-Brookline.

The Board has said in the past that our personnel cost is high because we have well-experienced teachers who have been on our faculty for longer than our peer average. I would think the performance and ranking of SHS should be better considering we have all that experience.

The Board's article concludes with: "When we heard about the US News results, we wanted to take the time to understand why we didn't make the cut on this particular ranking." Again, they stated WHICH ranking SHS did not meet, but not WHY we are underperforming compared with the state level.

It may indeed be time, as many have suggested, to return the focus of SHS back to the core principles on which it was founded. We were once ranked very high on the US News and World Report list. We can do much better than we are doing now.

Bob Brewster
Amherst

Why Not Dr. Kathie Nunley?

To the editor:

I was disappointed to see that the Souhegan Cooperative School Board did not select Dr. Kathie Nunley for the interim school board position. Dr. Nunley offered a wealth of expertise as an educator, author and self-employed business person, and would have brought a significant amount of knowledge and experience to the Board. Rather than selecting someone with a different perspective, the Board decided to reinstate a past board member.

As an observer of the Board meeting and vote, I noted the following:

1. The Board did not want to interview and deliberate in public session.
2. The majority of the board members were not prepared with interview questions for each candidate. The Board Chairperson asked Dr. Nunley specifically about her budgeting abilities, while the other candidate, Mrs. Ludt, was not asked any probing question about her financial expertise.
3. The candidates were asked to summarize their qualifications and explain why they were running for the open position. Dr. Nunley spoke about her educational background and knowledge of high school pedagogy. The other candidate did not delineate her qualifications, but spoke about her prior 12 years of service to the board in support of her qualifications. One of the board members asked Mrs. Ludt: What message did she believe the voters sent by rejecting the school budget and how would she work towards that message? Mrs. Ludt responded by saying she believed a minority of the voters were not happy with how the school was being managed. After observing the live interviews, I am still uncertain of Mrs. Ludt's specific qualifications, other than she was a past board member for 12 years, (during the same years when per pupil costs were rising dramatically) and that the other Board members were comfortable working with her, because she could "hit the ground running".

There were so few probing questions and a lack of public debate amongst the board members that it was clear to this observer that: a "Behind Closed Doors" discussion had taken place, the Board interview process was for public display purposes only and the actual selection outcome was already predetermined. In the eyes of this observer, Dr. Nunley's qualifications for the interim school board position were not taken seriously and Dr. Nunley's application did not receive the respect that it deserved from the Souhegan Cooperative School Board.

Margaret McCabe
Amherst

The Souhegan School Board Should Prepare for Sweeping Change – Not Just A Budget

To the editor:

The elections this past March raised a lot of questions about our schools, and Souhegan Cooperative High School (SHS) in particular. They also prompted some of us residents to take a closer look. This hasn't been hard, because Amherst schools, like those in other NH communities, submit required data to the NH Department of Education. What has been hard is absorbing the realities revealed by that data. Here are the facts.

Skyrocketing Costs – Over the past five years, Amherst has spent significantly more than the four surrounding towns to educate its school population. Specifically, Amherst has spent:

- \$57 million MORE than Bedford,
- \$46 million MORE than Milford,
- \$41 million MORE than Hollis,
- \$37 million MORE than Merrimack.

The salary and benefit packages of school-related personnel are among the highest in the state; indeed, they are seen as the Cadillac benchmarks for collective bargaining in other towns. Adding to the boat is the fact that we also have more personnel per student than most towns. This combination of excessive personnel and high salaries/benefits contributes heavily to skyrocketing costs.

Everyone, including the Souhegan Cooperative School District (SCSD) Board, admits that the cost-per-pupil is too high. What isn't made clear is that the overall costs of running Souhegan have ballooned over the past five years, despite the declining enrollment. It now costs \$75,000 to put one student through SHS, while the cost of doing so is only \$45,000 in other towns.

We know that the SHS cost-per-pupil is, in some cases, well over \$7,000 higher than comparable schools elsewhere. Last year, in an effort to bring these costs more in line, the SCSD Board worked to reduce that \$7,000+ gap by \$300 but stated that was all they could do at the time.

Also, the percentage of Amherst's overall town budget that goes to schools is one of the most skewed in the state (75.8% schools, 19.5% town, 4.7% county). This lopsided allocation of tax dollars may account for why we have no DPW garage to protect our vehicles, a fire station that has remained unfinished for decades, a police station that is so crowded there is no place to interrogate suspects, and mile upon mile of roads that go without maintenance for lack of funding.

And, of course, imagine the positive financial impact on Amherst and Mont Vernon households if some of those millions were never extracted from them as taxes to begin with.

Declining Quality – We might all find some solace if these millions of dollars had led to outstanding educational outcomes for our students, but they have not. Quantitative test results used by the State show that Bedford and Hollis-Brookline students have in almost all cases outperformed SHS students in reading, writing, math and science. Indeed, SHS student performance, rather than being superior, merely tracks with state averages.

Taken together, this is a poor report card. We are spending much more than surrounding towns, and our students do not appear to be receiving the quality of education they deserve.

While the SCSD Board acknowledges that costs are too high, at present, they have no measures-based strategic plan in place to target reductions in cost or increases in quality.

What Amherst and Mont Vernon families should expect from the SCSD Board as it prepares for the FY17 budget season is a measures-based, long-term plan that gets put in place prior to preparing a budget this fall. The plan should specify what improvements in quality they hope to achieve as compared with current metrics, and the cost reductions residents can expect to see over the next few years. Then, the Board should focus on its proposed FY17 plan to explain why they ultimately need the funds they propose. That way, the FY17 operational plan and budget will be linked to clear, targeted outcomes and not a narrow discussion of percentage increase or decrease over the current year's budget.

One might also hope that the SCSD Board will:

- Shift from selling the status quo to solving critical, persistent problems related to academic quality and high costs.
- Adhere to the letter and spirit of all RSA's, and work together and with citizens transparently, openly, and collaboratively.
- Rebalance the intended roles and checks/balances of:
- A board that provides generative thinking and strategic guidance along with fiduciary and legal oversight.
- An administration that manages to, and achieves, goals of quality and cost.
- A finance advisory group that reflects the taxpayer perspective rather than simply supporting the board's proposed budget.

That said, voters in both towns have contributed to these problems, and we should play a role in ameliorating them. For example, while we soundly vetoed the school budgets in March, we went ahead and supported the very collective bargaining agreements that continue to exacerbate salaries and benefits. How many of us actually read the agreements beforehand? How well did the boards explain the salient points of those agreements ahead of the elections?

In one agreement, we have actually voted to limit the number of teachers who can retire annually with retirement bonuses to four. Many more are waiting to retire, but can't without forgoing those bonuses. Paradoxically, the longer they remain on the payroll, the higher the budgets and the higher the monies required to fund their retirement later on. This is but one example of how residents ought to be paying more attention to, and holding our boards accountable for, effective leadership, management, transparency, and communication.

There was a time not so long ago when, by objective measure, Amherst schools were seen as some of the best around, and were run with fiscal acumen that made them a good value for everyone in town. We've had great schools; let's all work to get them back.

Mike Akillian
Amherst

Souhegan School Board Prepares For FY17 Budget Season

To the editor:

Most schools across the state are facing the challenge of how to adjust budgets so that cost per pupil more closely reflects the trend in declining enrollment numbers. Souhegan is no exception. We are in line with state averages for decreasing enrollments and increasing cost per pupil. While we are in a downward trend in enrollment, in the past two years our high school's enrollment has actually increased by 4%, while our overall budget had a net decrease.

Our Budget Study Committee, made up of Board members and administrators, was started two years ago to help us plan ahead and gather the necessary data to make thoughtful decisions. We continue to meet every two weeks to look at salary structures, enrollment, class sizes, curriculum offerings, administrative structure, student/teacher ratios, and much more. In June, the committee will be making recommendations to the Board as to FY17 budget goals, and will work throughout the summer so that we have clear goals and strategies by the time the FY17 budget season is upon us.

Our Board also wanted to share with you two recent budget decisions that we made.

Because we are in a default budget, we must remove the dollar value amount equal to all one time expenditures contained in the FY16 proposed operating budget. In order to reach this dollar value, the Board chose to eliminate costs that would have a long term impact in reducing our overall budget, rather than one time expenditures. First, the Board approved the elimination of an administrative Special Education Director's position.

We have been analyzing this position over the last couple of years, and feel it is the right time to make this change. We will work with the SAU 39 Special Education Leaders to fill the gaps that this elimination creates. Second, we have also eliminated a Special Education teaching position for next school year. Based on enrollments, we felt comfortable reallocating a 9th grade mini team and, therefore, eliminating the need for this position. We anticipate over \$200,000 savings from these changes. These are our first steps toward a lower proposed FY17 budget. We will keep you informed as we move along in this process.

As a reminder, below are some of the steps we have taken over the last few years in response to declining enrollment. We realize that this is just a beginning. However, we have several stakeholders: namely students, tax payers, and staff. We need to be thoughtful and balance the needs of all these stakeholders as we consider major changes that will effect the budget.

- **FY12:** Closed one of our two cafeterias
- **FY13:** Negotiated a 2 year contract that included:
 - .75% increase for professional staff over a 2 year period
 - 1.25% increase for support staff over a 2 year period
- reduced prescription benefits, higher health deductibles, incentives to choose lower cost providers
- **FY14:** Eliminated 10.2 positions
- **FY15:** Eliminated an additional 3.5 positions
- **FY15:** negotiated a contract that included a 0% increase for all of our staff over the next two years, and additional incentives for a lower cost health plan
- **Ongoing basis:** Our administration has been reviewing program of studies and staff placements, as well as the reallocation or repurposing of facilities space.

What are some of the results of these first steps? Souhegan's Cost Per Pupil decreased from FY13 to FY14, at a time when schools across the state were facing declining enrollment, and rising cost per pupil. Souhegan was one of the only, if not the only, school in the state to successfully reduce cost per pupil during this time.

- The high school's average teaching facing ratio went from 67:1 to 82:1 (the number of students any one teacher sees in a trimester) since FY13. Over 40% of teachers actually see many more students than that average.
- Student/Teacher ratio went from 9.1 to 10 .7 during the same time period.
- Class sizes went up by 3 students, on average, per class since FY13.
- As mentioned above, our budget had a net decrease over the last 2 years, at which time our enrollment was increasing by 4%.

Again, our work is not complete, and we will continue to communicate as we move forward.

We ask that you also communicate with us. The public is always welcome at our board meetings, and our e-mails are on the Souhegan High School and SAU website.

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Chris Janson, Jeanne Ludt

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Letters To the editor:

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