

Maintaining a comprehensive high school in the face of community elitism

By Spencer Kaye and Molly Bryck

Catherine A. Sanderson, a professor of psychology at Amherst College, mother of three and member of the Amherst School Committee as of April 1, 2008, blogs and blogs often. More than anything else, her motivation is to “push for a greater emphasis on academic excellence for all children in the Amherst schools.”

Some School Committee members, such as Catherine Sanderson, want to add an AP course for next year, while cutting woodworking, foods, dance, clothing, shop, jazz workshop and auto tech. Clearly the Committee values the academic promotion of a few over the needs of the whole.

The blog repeats that the proposed changes are ultimately for the benefit of the children. Here’s our question: has she asked the children? What we see here is a group of adults working through a sea of endless cuts. But if the goal is to enrich the lives of students, why not ask us? We, as well-informed seniors at ARHS, have listened closely to the many unheard opinions of the students that the committee members are trying their hardest to cater to.

We believe that ARHS should remain a comprehensive public high school where the needs of all students are met as well as possible. Of course we are in an economic crisis and cuts must be made, but those cuts must be made as fairly as possible. In these times, advocates of “excellence” are all too willing to compromise the bedrock value of equity that has defined the best of public school education.

The school committee is failing to recognize the intangibles; there are so many great things at the high school that we are unable to measure with the statistics they are using to make budgetary decisions. We need to recognize the students who excel at woodworking as much as those who excel in mathematics. That is what a comprehensive high school does. We don’t need students being tracked from day one, making it impossible for students to grow and change, dooming many students to fall short of Sanderson’s expectations.

ARHS prides itself on its expansive array of specialized electives, the same electives that are being eliminated, both in the arts and in the core curriculum. Perhaps some members of the community would be surprised to hear just how many high school students get out of bed in the morning just to be there for their Ceramics class, their Gay & Lesbian Lit class, their Anthropology class, their Woodtech class. Think about all the students ARHS will lose if that is taken away from them. And yes, some people like math, but we know about three people who get up in the morning for AP Calculus.

Our school’s interesting, fun, and diverse electives are what foster creativity and excitement in students. They are what give students that spark that top colleges desire. These are the classes that give students the motivation, creativity, self-respect and desire to learn and think and feel and grow and actually do something meaningful with their lives. An art course can change a student’s life; the bond a student forms with a teacher who works relentlessly to inspire them. Do you really expect a student’s 12th AP course to be life changing?

The idea behind public schools is that they should meet the needs of all students. If students struggle they may need more than students who are not struggling. They should get it, bar none. Their families pay taxes too. The philosophy behind a great public school is that everyone is educated, that while everyone may not get everything they want, everyone gets most of what they need.

Furthermore, at times like this, what we need most is support for our hard-working faculty and administration, not constant criticism, which is often offered anonymously. We need leadership that can be expansive in recognizing the needs of all the students in the system. Mark Jackson has been striving for our students to get the academic support they need, and his efforts merit support.

The top students at Amherst Regional will still get into name-brand colleges and universities, so everyone should just chill and look at the big picture. Realistically, most students will never attend those name-brand schools, and tracking students is not the answer to the improvement of ARHS. Simple statistical analysis cannot be the answer.

Students do not fall into simple categories. We are all complex and unique. Please stop trying to shove us into separate academic boxes. Achieving academic excellence, while disregarding anyone who is struggling, is not meeting the mission of our public school. Look beyond the statistics.

To see for yourself, go to <http://myschoolcommitteeblog.blogspot.com> and post your opinion.

Fundraising necessary to save electives in this economy

By Benji Lerner

Budget cuts in schools are a national tragedy. America is compromising its future to save the present. The proposal to drop electives is old news to most students and teachers, many of whom are facing lost jobs or reduced salaries. At the beginning of this year all clubs were put on hold until parents raised \$20,000 from donations, after which the clubs were re-introduced.

If \$20,000 could be raised by direct donation, think what could happen if students host bake sales. Bake sales may seem ineffectual, but every-

thing helps. If every student donates one dollar, it would become thousands. Events like music and dance performances raise money for the school, but they have their own expenses. Those who plan events require payment. If a group of students and teachers donated their time and effort to plan and host events, there would be fewer planning expenses.

Selling tickets is not the only way to collect money. Students could tap into other resources to raise money. Perhaps students could offer their

art pieces to be sold at an art fair. This idea is not ideal by any stretch of the imagination; many students would want to keep their art. It’s possible that

America is compromising its future to save the present.

instead of throwing away objects, students could auction off their work.

There is yet another re-

source within the school that could be utilized. Many, if not all of the concerts at the school are recorded. The music department

could be utilized. Many, if not all of the concerts at the school are recorded. The music department sold calendars, so why not compile all the audio and video tracks onto a CD? There would be an expense for the raw materials and labor, but it would ultimately make a profit. A pack of 50 blank CDs costs \$20. If labor would cost \$20 an hour, and 25 CDs could be finished in an hour, the initial expense would be \$60. If each

CD is sold for \$20, the total income would be \$1000, with a net gain of \$940. One CD would make \$18.80. If 1000 CDs were sold, it would raise \$18,800.

It would not be easy to raise \$1,000,000, but that does not mean we should give up all hope for next year’s elective offerings. If everybody steps in and pulls their weight, we can accomplish anything. Without new experiences available in elective courses, students may not ever find their passion. The electives are vital our growth, and should not be compromised to save money.