

To: SAU Board
Fr: Wayne F. Gersen
Dt: December 7, 2005
Re: **Looking Forward**

As indicated in a cover memo for the materials I've gathered in the past month regarding foreign language immersion, it is evident that the launching of an elementary immersion program in fall of 2006 is too ambitious. Based on my research on the implementation of elementary foreign language immersion programs, I reached the following conclusions:

- ❖ **Limiting enrollments in a foreign language immersion program is counter-productive:** Based on their experience, Milton cautioned us to avoid a lottery system to limit enrollments. If we experience the same level of enrollment in immersion programs as other districts (*see next bullet*), we would expect to have over 35 students vying for roughly 22 slots, meaning that more than 35% of the applicants would be denied entry.
- ❖ **Elementary immersion programs typically attract 30% of students in a grade level:** Assuming the same level of interest in our districts, this poses three major problems for our district:
 - **SPACE:** If we ran more than one immersion class per grade level we would encounter space challenges in 2007-08 instead of 2009-10.
 - **STAFFING:** By offering only one immersion class per year, we anticipated that we would not be forced to reduce any current teachers because "normal attrition" would have enabled us to replace retirees and resignations. An expanded program would likely require reduction of current teaching staff.
 - **BUDGET:** As indicated in the final bullet, as the immersion program expands we would expect to incur additional costs. A faster expansion of the program would result in those additional costs hitting the district immediately.
- ❖ **Elementary immersion programs affect all curriculum areas in the elementary school:** The Milton elementary curriculum is much more uniform than our current elementary curriculum. In Milton, the curriculum sequences in science and social studies are identical across the district and all schools use the same approach to mathematics instruction and reading instruction. This uniformity is important because the immersion students eventually receive direct instruction in these content areas in English. Before implementing an immersion program, we would need to determine how we would manage the transition of immersion students into English instruction and, thus, revisit the curriculum in all of our content areas.

- ❖ **Elementary immersion programs have a long-range effect on foreign language offerings in secondary schools:** In the long run, we would need to modify our foreign language program at the middle school and high school levels to accommodate the immersion students. Before launching an immersion program we need to determine how many grades will include the immersion program and how we will staff our foreign language departments at the high school.

- ❖ **Elementary immersion programs require administrative support:** Successful immersion programs have a coordinator or administrator who is knowledgeable about the acquisition of foreign language, who understands the day-to-day challenges of running an elementary school, and who can recruit, train, and retain high quality immersion teachers.

- ❖ **An elementary immersion program in SAU 70 would face some logistical complications that cannot be addressed in short order.** The logistical issues regarding the introduction of an immersion program take two forms: legal and practical. The legal issues deal with the unique district structure in New Hampshire and Vermont and the especially unique configuration of SAU 70. Unlike most (*if not all*) districts with immersion programs, SAU 70 has separate school boards for each elementary school **and** two different State Departments to deal with. While I remain confident that we could overcome these issues if the boards want to proceed with an immersion program, I do not believe we could address these issues in a timely enough fashion to recruit students and teachers into an immersion program for this coming Fall. The practical issues are implied above: determining the scope of the program (*i.e. the number of classes, the class size, the method for selecting students*), making curriculum adjustments, identifying an administrator to oversee the program, and determining the impact of the program on the staffing patterns at each elementary school cannot be accomplished in a timely enough fashion to introduce a quality program in the coming school year.

- ❖ **An elementary immersion program in SAU 70 would not be “budget neutral”:** When the factors outlined above are taken into consideration, it would not be possible to implement an immersion program that does not have a budgetary impact. Assuming a half-time administrator is needed, we would need to include their salary and benefits in one of the district budgets. Assuming the program would enroll roughly 25 Hanover tuition students, we would not lose enough students to warrant the staff reduction that would be needed to offset the added tuition costs. With these added costs there would likely be higher budgets in both Norwich and Hanover.

I believe the last bullet requires us to answer the “next dollar” question, which is:

“If we have one more dollar to spend to improve the schools in SAU 70, how would we spend that dollar?”

Based on my visit to Milton, I believe that elementary foreign language immersion is worthwhile and would, in all likelihood, make it onto a list of “next dollar” programs. However feedback I’ve received from the public after reading newspaper articles regarding the exploration of foreign language immersion indicates a need to examine the “next dollar” question. Some people in the school and community asked why I was focusing on foreign language when the students in our country are lagging in math and science performance. Others questioned the need for an “elite” program like elementary foreign language immersion when we have some students who are struggling in the core subjects in school and we have average students who are “lost in the shuffle”. Still others ask why we need to spend ANY more money on our schools. They believe we are already spending more than our neighboring districts, noting that our seniors are entering good colleges when they graduate.

I do not think the Board or administration can answer the “next dollar question” without seeking broad input from the community. Following discussion with Board members and administrators over the past several days, I propose that we spend the next several months seeking an answer to the “next dollar question” and that we attack this problem in the same way we attacked the question regarding athletic fields. Following the second defeat of the athletic fields bond, the Dresden Board convened a community forum in May 2004, and gathered some structured feedback. That feedback was handed over to an Athletic Fields Survey Committee, who worked with Bob Sokol to formulate a questionnaire drawing from the information gathered at the May forum. At the same time, the Dresden Board established an Athletic Fields Committee who independently examined the results of the survey, convened meetings where they gathered input from the staff and community, and developed a plan for the fields that was presented to the board and ultimately to the community for a vote. Using that same template, I propose the following sequence:

- ❖ Identify 3-5 members of the SAU Board to develop a plan for a Community Forum to be held in early February and to review this proposed “plan of attack”.
- ❖ Following the Community Forum, the SAU Board will create a Community Survey Committee to develop a systematic means of gathering information on the school districts that comprise the SAU.
- ❖ In April or May, the SAU Board will create a Community School Improvement Committee whose broad mission will be to identify and prioritize the initiatives the SAU Boards should consider in the development of its 2007-08 through 2011-12 budgets.
- ❖ In October or November, the Community School Improvement Committee will issue a report of its findings so that their recommendations can be considered in the budget cycle.

At our meeting on Monday, I plan to give a brief oral presentation on the immersion update followed by the proposal outlined on this page. If this looks like a promising direction to take, Linda Gray can identify 3-5 volunteers to begin the first phase of planning.