

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

ASD MEMORANDUM #152 (2000-2001)

December 11, 2000

TO: SCHOOL BOARD

FROM: OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

SUBJECT: RECOMMENDATION REGARDING STATUS OF WALDEN  
POND CHARTER SCHOOL

RECOMMENDATION:

It is the Administration's recommendation that the School Board approve the Superintendent's recommendation to close the Walden Pond Charter School at the end of their first semester, December 15, 2000.

PERTINENT FACTS:

**Historical Background**

The Walden Pond Charter School was approved by the Anchorage School Board on February 10, 1997 [ASD Memorandum #195 (1997-98)] and by the State Board of Education on April 28, 1997.

The Administration has worked extensively with Walden Pond Charter School over the past four years and has seen real progress in some areas and continuing problems regarding budget, staff and leadership turnover, student turnover and enrollment, lack of consistent parental involvement, and discipline issues since the school opened in the fall of 1997. The Administration and the School Board have discussed these issues every year when the school has given its annual report and at other times each year (Attachments A - D).

The current leadership of the school, Headmaster Meghan Hackett, is to be commended for her extraordinary commitment to the school. She and the staff have assisted the students in so many ways against huge challenges related to turnover, a very small staff who is required to teach an average of five or six levels of students in each of their five or more different classes a day or week; an

impossible task in light of the increasing academic standards required by both the State and the District. The Administration has serious concerns about the viability of the academic program at this time. The reduction in staff and funding for the past two years has necessitated major revisions in the academic program; it is not the same program which was approved by the Administration and School Board and is not in conformance with their charter at this time. The major change in the program is directly related to the lack of an adequate number of teachers and support staff.

The Academic Policy Committee chair, Mr. Tony Hussey, is the chair for the second year and has provided clear and consistent direction and leadership to the APC, but he has been hampered by a lack of overall parental support at the school except in times of crisis, such as now. Parental involvement is absolutely critical to the success of a charter school and that has been problematic from the beginning in 1997. This has also been discussed at many meetings over the past few years.

The staff and APC have provided a great deal of nurturing and support to the students there, but their efforts have been plagued by enrollment shortfalls, lack of full-time staff, an increasing number of students needing extra support and assistance, and a lack of a full-time administrator and any support services for students such as counselors, full-time special education staff, etc. The staff simply is not experienced enough, or academically prepared enough, to address all of the students learning needs in this program.

The strength of this program, which has been discussed many times, has been the small size and the very personal nature of the school. There is no question that some students there have found academic and personal success at Walden Pond where they have never felt successful in a large comprehensive middle or high school. It reinforces to the Administration that we need to do all we can to break down the barriers in our larger schools in order to provide a more personalized school situation for all of our schools. We recognize that we have much work to do to assure the parents of these students that we will assist their young people in every way we can if they will work with us; we care about these students and will make every effort to insure a smooth transition back to our other schools if that is what the parents and students decide to do.

The Administration will be offering all of the Seniors an opportunity to attend school at Benny Benson Secondary School along with their Headmaster, Ms. Hackett. Barbara Garrison, the principal at Benny Benson, has been most accommodating and will be an excellent resource for these students. We will do all we can to insure that these Seniors remain on track for graduation and will

recognize their Walden Pond status in some way on their diploma. Those Seniors who choose something else certainly may do so.

As can be seen in Attachment C, the Administration had to reduce the Walden Pond budget last year in January due to lower than anticipated enrollment. Five teaching positions were eliminated, class sizes were increased, and the number of electives were reduced; other expenditures were covered by carry-over funds from their State Charter School Grant. Fund-raisers were held with minimal success and recruiting efforts fell far short despite considerable effort and expense. The school year ended successfully with more graduates than the year before. Real concern was expressed by the Administration and discussed with the School Board in June when the Annual Report was reviewed with the Walden Pond Academic Policy Committee. The Administration was very clear that Walden Pond must either increase their enrollment to over 200 students by the end of October 2000 or the school would be in danger of closing.

The Walden Pond Academic Policy Committee and the staff worked diligently over the summer to advertise and recruit new students and to insure that current students would return; they had mixed success even after an aggressive media and print advertising campaign. There has been much student turnover at the school which has contributed to the problem. The Acting Superintendent met with about 200 students and staff and the Academic Policy Committee in early October of this school year and discussed the concerns regarding their low student enrollment, the cutbacks to their academic program, the almost impossible teaching responsibilities for their teachers, the increasing number of special needs students who needed extra counseling and assistance, and the need to increase their enrollment. This meeting received quite a bit of media coverage and the middle school principals and high school principals and assistant principals worked with their counselors to identify students who might be more successful at Walden Pond than in a larger school. Some students did transfer to Walden Pond; others left Walden Pond and their enrollment at the end of the count period at the end of October was 148.75 Average Daily Membership (ADM) as opposed to the 210 ADM on which their budget was based.

A meeting was held with Ms. Meghan Hackett, Headmaster and full-time teacher at the school, and Mr. Tony Hussey, chair of the APC, and the Administration to discuss the situation and to come to a decision regarding this charter school. The budget issues were reviewed first (Attachment E) and it quickly became obvious that even with cutting back on all extra costs and eliminating the 4.5 FTE who are employed as substitutes (including a Special Ed Teaching Assistant), there would still be an approximately \$250,000 deficit in their budget. Cuts which will be required are as follows:

- Loss of 3.5 FTE currently working with students and recombine the 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes (36 students), the 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes (37 students), and the 10<sup>th</sup> grade classes (31 students).
- The remaining six teachers would then have four class preparations (two teachers), five preparations (two teachers), six preparations for Ms. Hackett with no planning period and all responsibility for discipline, district and parent contacts, etc., and nine preparations for high school math since they would have to recombine sections into the same class period. This is completely unsound academically and the Administration and the Headmaster and the APC chair all agree that this is not acceptable for the students and we believe it is our responsibility to look out for the best interest of the students' educational program.
- The elective teachers would be cut; there would be no skating, art, Spanish, or American Sign Language. Two of the teachers listed above would be teaching two more electives on top of the core classes.
- Special Education services would be at an unacceptable level; many of the Walden Pond students have special needs (over 25%), some with IEPs and some without IEPs; there is no certified special education teacher on staff this year and a Teacher's Assistant is working closely with the Middle School Special Education Supervisor and Teacher Consultant to insure that current IEP's are met. All IEP's will have to be revised through IEP meetings involving parents and staff prior to the second semester. Many other students have been recommended for psychological evaluations and with no counselor on site, the problems are compounding. Again, the consensus is, the situation is not in the best interest of the students' social and emotional and academic needs.

On December 5, the Acting Superintendent, met with the Academic Policy Committee, students, staff, and parents at the Walden Pond Charter School to discuss the recommendation to close the school at the end of their first semester, December 15. Approximately 60 people were in attendance for all or part of the meeting. Brief statements were made by the chair of the APC, the Headmaster, and the Acting Superintendent; these were followed by extensive questioning and discussion for about two hours. This meeting was very well-organized by the chair of the APC and Ms. Hackett, and very emotional for all in attendance as this is a very difficult time for everyone at the school. They were encouraged to attend and testify at the December 11, 2000, School Board meeting to make their case to remain open until the end of the school year with additional funding, to the Administration and the School Board.

A summary of the concerns expressed at the meeting are listed below; all errors and misunderstandings were clarified:

- This decision is unfair to students who are successful for the first time in their lives.
- An allegation that the District allocates more funding the schools on the Hillside than to this charter school.
- There is no safety net in place for these students.
- A desire to keep the seniors together.
- Unfair funding to charter schools for facilities and for all else.
- A demand for placement in any school of their choice.
- The disruption to 140 students and their families.
- The status of transfer of the staff.
- The district should give the parents the funds so they could go to a private school of their choice.
- The district should pay the \$90,000 lease for the rest of the year and add funds to their budget for a fully-funded charter school, including counselors and a principal.
- The district's lack of commitment to saving the school is obvious because the Acting Superintendent did not contact various non-profits to solicit funds.
- The lack of consistent and on-going parental involvement, except in times of crisis, has led to this moment.

There were some very profound and compelling testimonials from students who are very distraught about leaving this school. Everyone who spoke commended the staff for their love and concern for them and the students. There is no question that our larger schools have not worked for some of these students. This Administration is committed to working through these issues as best we can within our financial and staffing constraints.

Options for the Students were also discussed. As stated above, the seniors and Ms. Hackett are being offered the opportunity to attend Benny Benson Secondary School for the remainder of the 2000-2001 school year. Other students may enroll in their neighborhood middle or high school, apply for zone exemptions in other schools—some are open enrollment and some will have to be reviewed on a case by case basis. Students with special education needs will have those reviewed by their IEP teams; if a 504 Plan exists, that will also be considered. Some of the alternative schools are full with long waiting lists; these will also be considered on a case by case basis; others are open. In addition, the Family Partnership Charter School is willing to take a few of the students; Village Charter School is full for this year and cannot take additional students. SAVE High School is also over capacity and has a very long waiting list. The

Administration will continue to identify options as we work through these issues over the next month.

Ms. Hackett is working closely with the Executive Directors of High School and Middle Schools and the Acting Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and the Acting Superintendent on student and staff issues. Middle school counselors met with students last week and this will continue this week. Students and parents will be encouraged to meet with counselors at their neighborhood schools prior to making a final decision. Since these students will complete their first semester on December 15, some may choose to wait to enroll on January 22, the beginning of the ASD second semester; others will want to enroll on January 2, 2001. Both options are possible.

### **Lease at the Dimond Center**

The lease at the Dimond Center has been reviewed by our attorneys and our Purchasing Department along with the minutes of the School Board meeting on February 10, 1997. The School Board at the time amended its approval of the original application to reflect their concerns regarding the facilities issue:

“The School Board will approve the application and proposed contract for the Walden Pond Charter School to open in the fall of 1997-98 school year, contingent upon resolution of the concerns about the facility, and contingent on the successful resolution of the issues in Memorandum #195.”

Once the School Board approved this charter school, the request was approved by the State Board of Education as noted above. The final contract with the proposers was approved by the School Board on June 23, 1997, showing that the charter school would be housed in the Dimond Center in a facility leased by Walden Pond, Inc., not the Anchorage School District (Attachment F). The contract was approved by our Attorneys at Jermain, Dunnagan, and Owens, as well as our Purchasing Department. It was made clear to the Walden Pond, Inc. personnel and the various Headmasters and APC chairs over the years, that the District would not assume the liability if funding for their lease became a problem. This has been restated every year in June at School Board meetings during the Annual Report discussions and during the January budget discussions. The costs for the lease must come from the budget of the Walden Pond Charter School as allocated to the school in the budget, or through grants which they may have received.

Mr. Hussey, the APC chair, has notified the Dimond Center of the potential closure of the school. The lease expires on June 30, 2001. The

monthly rate is \$15,530.40 and has been paid montly thorough our normal requisition process. The Dimond Center is working with the charter school to try and lease the space, but they expect payment through the lease period if they are unsuccessful in finding a tenant. Our attorneys have advised us (Attachment G) that we are not liable for the payments; they remain the responsibility of Walden Pond, Inc.

In conclusion, the Administration feels that it has no recourse but to make this recommendation for both educational and financial reasons. The Acting Superintendent cannot recommend subsidizing this charter school's budget any longer when it cannot do so for all other charter schools. The conditions of approval were clear from the beginning and through massive effort of all parties, the Administration believes that the academic program is not viable and the students must be educated elsewhere in order to continue to progress toward graduation and passing the High School Qualifying Exam.

The Administration also believes that the conflict between the charter school law and Senate Bill 36 relating to funding for schools must be addressed. The size of charter schools is usually smaller and more personal; the funding law penalizes these schools by allocating full funding only to schools over 200 students.

CC

Attachments

Prepared by: Carol Comeau, Superintendent (Acting)

Approved by: Carol Comeau, Superintendent (Acting)