

March 27, 2021

I would like to share with you my personal beliefs around the WHY of the proposed program changes at Salida High School. I will also touch upon the specific whys of a Freshman Academy and the emphasis on social studies and civics.

During my first full year on the board (2018), I, as a member of the District Accountability Committee, assisted in a survey of the educational values held by our community. Expressed values that resonated with me included financial responsibility, maintaining our facilities, paying our teachers more, the importance of social/emotional learning, academic rigor, the capacity for critical thinking and hard discussions, being prepared for life after graduation, and good citizenship. I took your values to heart as I, too, believe in these values. I have strived to include them in decision making around managing the district and programming changes.

In my time on the board I have questioned how well prepared our graduates are for the stresses and complications of 21st century living in a society with deep equity issues and significant divisions in its values and perspectives on life. In July, 2020, the board received a letter from Alex Maes and thirteen fellow graduates from classes 2005-2020. While these students felt they received a “rich and comprehensive education” at SHS, they also had come to believe that there were many gaps in their education that left them unprepared for the larger world they faced. Specifically they did not feel prepared to deal with the topics of race, equity and justice. They requested, among other things, a comprehensive reform of Advisory to allow discussion of current social issues, an integration of diverse cultural and literature education into core classes, and a commitment to investing in more perspectives in order to make our community and students stronger.

I was deeply touched by the desire of these graduates to help our current students be better prepared for the world they will face upon graduation. Based, in part, on this letter SSD now has a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policy. I have remained in touch with Alex and when the work of the board is challenging I think of her and am driven to continue serving the best interests of all our students. Your values and the inspiration of Alex and her fellow graduates are my motivation behind the WHY of the proposed changes in our programming.

In regard to the concept of a Freshman Academy, there are three concrete reasons to consider this: an emphasis on Social/Emotional Learning, continued exploration of potential career pathways, and making sure that all freshman are academically prepared to participate in college course work if they so desire.

Social/Emotional Learning, probably the number one value expressed in the 2018 values survey, is an essential, but complicated learning process requiring teachers interested in and trained to teach it. Longfellow has a successful program. Salida Middle School is finding its way to a successful program. But frankly, Salida High School has not yet found success. As the board and the district believe in the necessity and value of SEL competence in life we hope for success in trying a year of intense social/emotional education in the ninth grade.

In the Middle School, as well as at the Crest Academy, one programming focus is exposing students to various career pathways. It makes sense to continue this exploration in the ninth grade by having students intentionally explore what excites them, what motivates them to learn and to acquire new knowledge and skills. I believe excitement, interest, and personal relevance lead to focus and focus leads to better academic achievement and success. The expectation is not to have students commit to a specific career, that makes no sense for a ninth grader, but rather to have students consider where their personality, skills, desires, and values might lead them. This is a critical step in determining what courses they would like to take in the rest of their high school years, some of which could be concurrent enrollment classes with CMC.

Research from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce shows that two thirds of all jobs require post secondary education and training. Here in Colorado, the Work Force Development Council has found that 89% of top jobs in our state require a credential past high school. In addition, the Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado Department of Higher Education in a joint study have found that students who enroll in concurrent enrollment are more likely to enroll in college, less likely to need remediation in college, have higher grade point averages, higher retention rates in their first year and are more likely to afford a college degree because of tuition saving secondary to free concurrent enrollment classes in high school.

If we want our students to have careers that lead them or keep that out of poverty for the rest of their lives they need some equivalent of college education, be it a credential, an Associate of Arts degree or a four year degree.

To be prepared for concurrent enrollment classes in grades 10-12, it is my belief that there must be a focus in ninth grade on academic proficiency particularly in math and English language arts. Some of our students will already have the academic standing to be able to take college classes, but some will not. As a board member I feel a deep responsibility to see that ALL our students have the academic preparation to be capable of taking whatever level of college class they want. Or if they are not interested in college classes that they have the math and English skills necessary to join the work force upon graduation from high school. I believe that a Ninth Grade Academy allows our teachers and counselors the time to help those students who need additional support in attaining proficiency in these areas.

Please realize these are my values, research and desires driving the intention of a Ninth Grade Academy. I and my fellow board members are looking at this issue from the 30,000 ft. level. We do not have the education or experience to decide the details of implementing these plans. We leave that to our dedicated, experienced and skilled staff.

I think all of us could agree that the last year has been incredibly difficult, challenging, stressful, and shocking at times. I know we all want to return to something akin to normal. Over the recent months, I, with consideration, thought and much reluctance, have come to believe that "normal" as we once knew it is gone forever. The pandemic and the political division in our country have laid bare the fault lines in our country and in the world. Our country is torn by inequity socially and economically. A common, unifying understanding of what is real is absent and our government is so divided it cannot function. We are sending our students, our children

out into a world they are ill prepared for. In times like this all I know to do is to return to our mutually held values: academic rigor, critical thinking and the capacity for hard discussions, financial responsibility, social emotional skills, responsible citizenship, and support in preparing for life out there.

As a concerned, caring and responsible board member I feel we need to refocus some of our student's precious time in high school on social studies and civics while also offering STEM classes. Our students need to understand how our government works so that they may be responsible citizens of our country. And, they will also be, now more than ever, global citizens. For success in the global world of today they need proficiency in economics as well as a realistic sense of the history and cultures of our country and the world. Equally important in understanding the world will be scientific and media literacy.

Most importantly, I believe our students need to be able to critically think about every aspect of their life experience from relationships, to work and careers, and to the challenges and impacts of living in a rapidly, dynamically changing world. Steven Shafersman said critical thinking is reasonable, reflective, responsible, and skillful thinking that is focused on what to believe or do. He feels that critical thinking serves the higher good of our community, our culture and our country. With critical thinking comes the capacity to have hard conversations that will help guide and direct our student's pathways to successful and satisfying lives.

Again, please remember that the board is acting on the values you expressed three years ago. We honor those values as we create a vision of where we want educational programming and curriculum to take our students and your children. As this process unfolds we will be seeking your input as we are right now. We are confident that our staff with their training and experience have the skills to design and implement our vision.

Thank you,
Jeannie Peters