

Portland Public Schools
Administrative Offices
196 Allen Ave., Portland, Maine 04103
207-874-8100



August 19, 2009

Michael Langella
382 Pleasant Ave.
Peaks Island, ME 04103

Dear Michael:

After a conversation you and I had separately with the previous Superintendent Jeanne Whynot-Vickers, she informed Principal Gwen Smith that she would not cut staffing on Peaks Island during this budget year. Ms. Smith shared this information with Peaks Island residents so there was a clear expectation that staffing would remain the same for the coming school year. As a result, I am no longer considering reducing the staff from four teachers to three for the 2009-10 school year. I was unaware that such a conversation occurred as I was analyzing staffing needs for the system.

As you know, I have received a number of emails regarding my intent to move a teacher from Peaks Island to the mainland and we discussed providing a letter to you outlining the situation from my perspective. First and foremost, it was never my intent for any of you to hear that I was considering moving a teacher from Peaks Island to the mainland from anyone other than myself. Unfortunately, I heard after the fact that you learned of my thoughts second hand. I felt compelled to send a letter out last Friday, as I had learned of this situation only the evening before.

Second, as we entered August, the number of students per class is an increasing concern. The number of classes above 20 is rising. Currently over 30 classes are now over 20 and 10 of those 30 classes are at or over 23. I asked two principals to reconfigure their staffs to lower class sizes, while I looked at other options such as moving staff from one building to another and/or looking to see if there was a way to reallocate the budget.

Third, we currently have over 60 new immigrant children yet to be placed in mainland classrooms, meaning that these classes will continue to increase in size over the next several weeks. The class size situation on the mainland is changing daily and I need to be mindful of the needs of the entire system.

As you can see, much of this issue has developed in late July and early August. The budget was developed over the winter of 2008-09. All budgets are best estimates at the time they're developed. Student projections at the time of budget development were such that the staffing recommendations seemed reasonable. In tough economic times staffing issues once normally resolved through additional hiring can only be resolved by reallocating staff.

In addition to the staffing issue, you requested that I address several other issues not directly

related to class size. The district's buildings, especially at the elementary level, are in horrible shape. Maintenance cuts over the years have left our elementary buildings in great disrepair. This is an issue that I've been very public about in the papers and with the School Committee. The Peaks Island School, along with many of the system's elementary schools, is in disrepair. The School Committee is working on a long-range plan to repair our schools, particularly our elementary buildings.

On another topic, no multi-age classroom on the mainland has a dedicated Ed. Tech assigned to them because they are multi-age. Ed Techs are assigned to classrooms based upon the needs of the students.

On two other issues you asked me to address, the time for specials like art, music and phys ed. are based upon the total student enrollment in any given school and Special Education services are scheduled based upon a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). The goal for the school system is to provide equitable services to all the children in the district.

I look forward to meeting with you at the August 24th meeting at 6:30 P.M. to discuss this and other issues further.

Sincerely

Dr. James C. Morse, Sr.
Superintendent of Schools

Cc: School Committee
Joe Gray, City Manager
Portland City Council