

**Mr. Chairman, members of the State Board, Commissioner, and educational colleagues:**

Good morning. I'm Kenneth Rocke, Interim Superintendent at Gill-Montague Regional School District. With me is Robert 'Chip' Wood, Principal of Sheffield Elementary School, and Director of Teaching and Learning for our elementary schools. Also with us – in the audience – is Nancy Daniel Green, President of the Gill-Montague Educational Association (our teachers' association), a group that has been instrumental in enabling us to join GIC, and to negotiate teachers' contracts focused on educational improvement.

We thank you for the opportunity to talk about the progress our schools have made over the past few years, and also for the chance to let you know the kinds of help we need. I want to acknowledge the help we've already received from the Department of Education, both in terms of leadership and improvement reports and audits, and also in terms of excellent focused professional development training in math, language and curriculum mapping. The gains we've made to date are directly connected to these resources we've been given.

I'm sure you're all familiar with the situation of our schools. You've read the Leadership Report, and our response, our Turn Around Plan. I will not labor over the details – as we've been asked to be brief and concise this morning – but will instead focus on our current and future needs. I would like to point out that I believe that the situation facing Gill-Montague School District – an economically challenged area whose schools have dramatically increasing needs of students on the one hand, and decreasing state aid and decreasing ability of local towns to provide additional resources on the other – that this situation is symptomatic of a number of districts and regions, particularly across the Route 2 corridor in Western Massachusetts.

To begin, I'd like to read a short statement from the Chair of our School Committee, Mary Kociela, who had to work today and was unable to join us. Then I will ask Chip Wood to talk a little about our educational needs and educational resources. Finally, I will focus on budget matters and our requests to the DOE and the State Board. We'll then be glad to answer any questions that you might have.

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**Statement on behalf of the GMRSD School Committee (Chair Mary Kociela)**

Dear Department of Education Board Members,

My name is Mary Kociela. I have served on the Gill Montague Regional School Committee for seven years, the past three as Chairperson. I am proud to represent this district with its outstanding students and dedicated staff.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to visit our schools and for the resulting District Leadership Evaluation Report. The report states, "the School Committee has not provided sufficient leadership to enable the district to make academic progress" and recommends "the GMRSD Committee must take prompt action to address two major issues". First, to ensure effective and stable leadership, it is recommended that we pursue an agreement with the Interim Superintendent for an additional year and implement a plan to recruit an effective leader the following year. Second, we must address the issue of elementary configuration.

I would like to briefly comment on the School Committee's progress to date on these recommendations.

**Effective and Stable Leadership**

The School Committee agrees with the evaluation report, which commends Interim Superintendent Kenneth Rocke for providing effective leadership in the district. It is for this reason that we requested and gratefully received a critical needs waiver from the DOE allowing us to renew Mr. Rocke's contract for an additional year, through June 2009. The School Committee set goals and indicators with Superintendent Rocke in October and will be evaluating his performance of those goals in April. We are currently in the process of negotiating a new one-

year contract to take effect in July 2008. It is our strong belief that retaining Mr. Rocke will allow us the necessary stability to strengthen our leadership capacity. In the fall of 2008, we will begin the process of hiring a permanent leader for the district.

### **Elementary Configuration**

In regard to elementary configuration, several steps have been taken since the writing of the District Leadership Evaluation Report.

1. The School Committee held a goal setting retreat and hired an outside consultant in October. All committee members agreed that the number one priority goal was to “restore public trust, confidence and respect in the school committee by reaching a decision on the elementary configuration issue that puts the needs of students first and enjoys broad public support”.
2. An amendment to the regional agreement was passed in both towns changing the voting threshold to close a school from 8 out of 9 votes to a two-thirds majority of the full school committee and a majority vote by town meeting of the town in which the school resides.
3. A policy was drafted and passed that requires a two-thirds majority vote of the full school committee (rather than simple majority) to move grade levels from one district school to another.
4. A motion was passed, with eight affirmative votes, consolidating grades 1 and 2 from Hillcrest into Sheffield Elementary School. The motion also closed Montague Center School unless a citizens group brings forward a viable alternate plan by March 11th. The School Committee has subsequently heard two proposals and will deliberate the viability of these plans on March 20<sup>th</sup> with a final vote on March 25th.
5. A preliminary budget was passed that includes projected savings from elementary consolidation and our successful negotiation into the GIC. It is our hope that this will allow us to re-establish lost programs and staff.

I am confident that this School Committee, in collaboration with Superintendent Rocke and the administrative team, will continue to show dedication and leadership in these difficult fiscal times. I assure you that we are committed to providing the best quality education for all of our students.

(end of Mary Kociela’s statement)

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Next I would like to introduce Chip Wood for his comments. Chip has had a long and distinguished career of educational reform and innovation. He is a co-founder of the Northeast Foundation for Children, a founder of the Greenfield Center School, and a developer of the Responsive Classroom model for elementary education. We’re fortunate to have a person of his caliber helping to lead our district improvement efforts. He will be overseeing all elementary education in SY08-09.

### **Robert ‘Chip’ Wood**

Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you briefly this morning. When I was hired as principal of the Sheffield Elementary School five years ago, MCAS scores in all schools in the district were at or above state averages and met AYP, but the manifold educational needs that would be found by the EQA and confirmed by the District Leadership Evaluation Report within a few years were evident then. Five years ago, I joined a district administrative team with a new superintendent, new special education director, and new high school principal. All these positions have since turned over once more in this five-year period, along with Gill and Montague Center Elementary Schools having two principals during this time span. Discontinuity in leadership has made it difficult to build K-12 continuity in educational planning, as was reported by the EQA and Leadership Evaluation Report, but we have been making dogged progress in that direction. Financial discontinuity on the state and local level has also enveloped our low-income community in a recession mentality of low confidence. This has left even our most dedicated, upbeat, thirty-

year, exemplary teachers wondering if the resources will ever be available to deliver the supplemental services needed to help them lift every child up to proficiency.

During this five year period, with the many changes in leadership, greatly reduced financial and personnel resources, major distracting political issues regarding school consolidation and heightened stress and trauma in the community due to rising poverty, we have worked to address, and are continuing to address, several key educational priorities we know are necessary to turn-around the academic performance of students in our district. Our primary focus has been to align curriculum K-12 and create continuity in professional development.

1. ELA – We have adopted Houghton-Mifflin Reading K-6 as our Core Reading Program (yr 4) and have a complementary developmental reading program in middle school leading into the High School English Program. Our elementary teachers have developed “power standards” to compliment our Reading First initiative and core program. We need at least two additional full time Reading Resource Teachers to advance our professional expertise in this area.
2. Mathematics – We are in the first full year of district-wide adoption of Math Expressions – Houghton-Mifflin’s K-5 program – linked with Connected Mathematics (CMP-Pearson) in the middle school. We have already seen a one-year gain in 2007 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores of 13% in advanced and 12% in proficient from the CMP work. Our Elementary Math Committee has developed “power standards” based on the work of Douglas Reeves for essential frameworks K-5. We have had major professional development support from the authors of Math Expressions, one of whom, Dr. Steven Smith, is currently a resident professor and math coach in our schools this semester on special assignment from the primary author, Dr. Karen Fuson, Professor Emeritus, Northwestern University. We need a full time math coach in our district to keep this work rolling.
3. We have linked our core curriculum work with a robust 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center Grant Program that has operated successfully in our Sheffield School and Great Falls Middle School for the past five and four years. The Sheffield was just awarded a new competitive grant for 3-5 years. Both programs provide Homework Center help after-school and summer programming and the Sheffield now has flex-time before school academic assistance for children. Sheffield is also now a State approved SES provider as well for students requiring these tutorial services.
4. As a result of our work with the State and our middle school, we are involved in implementing the Galileo computer assessment programs in our schools and we are deeply involved in the DATA Warehouse pilot project with the State as well.
5. We have a strong five year partnership with Responsive Classroom and Northeast Foundation for Children, whose national headquarters is located in Turners Falls and we have implemented Responsive Classroom as an elementary initiative and Developmental Designs as a middle school initiative and are in a planning year with Educators for Social Responsibility to initiate an Advisory Program based on their model next year at the High School level. We firmly believe that the integration of social and academic learning is a key to raising achievement as research has shown. We have been deeply aware for many years of the disproportionate numbers of our students who do not graduate high school and the alarming percentage of these who are male. When we trace these numbers back through the elementary grades in discipline records we note that over 95% of all discipline referrals are male. Clearly we must find ways to change these numbers that so impact learning outcomes.

6. Early childhood and special education. There is a clear link between the level of resources we are able to provide to the youngest and neediest of our students and the academic performance of all our students when we begin to assess them academically in the third grade on MCAS. If our children are already not meeting AYP in the third grade it means they are behind before they have even really had a chance to succeed. This is clearly unacceptable. It is not that they need just a head start; they need a reasonably resourced primary education. If there were just one thing we could have from the State, I would ask for adequate early childhood resources in the form of a psychologist, a social worker, a play therapist, and teachers to lower class sizes in grades K-3 to address the high special education and mental health needs in these grades. Without these resources I fear we will never meet the long-range goals you and I insist on for these children.

We believe that we are underperforming as professionals only to the extent that we are stretched far too thin, working triage instead of managing as proactive professionals as we know how to. With adequate resources we can turn around this school district. We know the leverage points. We need some levers. Thank you for listening.

(end of Chip Wood's statement)

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### **Kenneth Rocke**

And so we turn to resources. How will we make the improvements we need to make, and how will we find the money to make it happen? We've joined the GIC – one of the very few districts to make it in this year – but the gains from GIC will be at best a one-year gain that we can devote to restoration of educational positions. GIC rates are up 8% for FY09, a great decrease from the 18% increases we've been seeing in the group we're leaving, but a rate still almost double the rate of a level-services budget. Unless this trend changes, in FY10, health insurance increases will again be forcing reductions in educational services, albeit at a lower rate than before.

Our proposed budget for FY09 is just over 17 million dollars, and is an increase of 5.49% over FY08. Even at this modest rate of increase, our towns are asking for a one million dollar plus reduction in this budget, and we are again facing the prospect of a series of budget defeats in town meetings, followed in July by a request for a Commissioner's budget, a district-wide meeting, and – perhaps – no official budget until October, November or December. With no way of guaranteeing what our final budget will be, we can neither plan effectively for educational improvements, nor hire for new and needed teaching and administrative positions during optimal hiring season.

We can understand our towns' dilemma. While Chapter 70 Aid has increased less than 1% per year for the past ten years, local assessments have risen an average of 9.5% over the same period, all generated by school budget increases in the 4% to 5% range. This year's level-services 5.49% budget increase has resulted in assessment increases of 12% for the Town of Montague and 16% for the Town of Gill.

Our towns feel that they have strongly supported our schools, have done more than their share, but have reached the breaking point. Both of our member towns are facing Proposition 2-1/2 overrides to fund level-service budgets for both town and school services. School budget increases are consuming 120% of revenue growth in one of our towns, and 156% in the other. This situation is unsustainable for both towns and schools.

Meanwhile, we have done the things that we can do to reduce costs and increase revenue. We made it into GIC in record time; we are in the process of consolidating classrooms and buildings at the elementary level; we are collaborating with our member towns on a five-year sustainability study; and we are working regionally with Senator Rosenberg's GCC group to explore collaborative models, super-regionalization, and other cost efficiencies.

In spite of our efforts, the storm of unintended consequences of well-intentioned educational policies is eroding our ability to make any fiscal headway at all. The net loss to our district from the combination of students choosing out of our district and others opting to attend charter schools is close to \$750,000 for FY08 alone. Unpredictable Special Education costs and mandated but unreimbursed special education transportation costs further exacerbate the situation.

Our district is not alone in facing this. We watch with dismay as neighboring districts move in and partially out of fiscal crisis. Whichever district faces the worst fiscal crisis tends to lose the most students, which then accelerates the cycle. This year we are in the unenviable position of projecting increases in school choice applicants to our district because our neighboring district is suffering serious financial problems. This is no way to run a region.

What is to be done? Well, to return to our own district's dilemma: if we reduce our budget requests to what our towns can afford, our schools' ability to meet the needs of our students will be severely compromised; if we do not reduce our budget, and our towns cannot pass our budget, we will be without one well into the next school year.

We need help. Today I'm asking for help of three kinds: funding, advocacy, and budget guarantees.

First, we need funding to provide math and literacy specialists and coaches throughout our schools. We also need either funding for or the provision of help for strategic and educational planning throughout the district. We need the services that Chip Wood has outlined, and we need to find the resources to continue the excellent district-wide professional development opportunities that the state has provided through direct services and stipended teacher workshops.

Second, we need help in advocating for increases in state aid. Sustainable educational improvement is dependent upon predictable, sustainable and adequate funding. The Chapter 70 Foundation Formula, as your own recent study has indicated, may be increasingly equitable in theory, but it is inadequate in fact. For poor towns and schools, inadequate aid means inequitable educational resources. We recognize that the solution to this problem is not within the authority of either the DOE or the State Board to remedy, but your advocacy for increased aid is essential.

Third, statute allows for the Commissioner to set a regional budget if towns have not approved one by July 1<sup>st</sup>. This process – and this statutory provision – were essential to the survival of our schools last year, and are likely to be again this year. I believe that this process needs to be strengthened and reinforced, particularly for school districts that have been judged to be underperforming. A number of mechanisms could be created for this. Perhaps minimum budgets for underperforming districts should be linked to the economic index that the legislature uses to set overall Chapter 70 Aid – the municipal implicit price deflator. If we had that guarantee alone, we'd know that we could work within a budget increase of 5.19% for FY09, and could begin the process of funding professional development, new hiring, and leadership that our district needs so badly.

Other mechanisms might be to hold School Choice revenue losses harmless for struggling districts such as our own, or to limit SPED circuit breaker losses. If some mechanism can be provided, we will be able to plan sensibly, to hire in a timely way, and to sustain our improvement efforts.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I'd like to say that we are a district committed and dedicated to the educational success of all of our students. We appreciate the help that we've been given, and ask – for the sake of our students and our communities – that you continue to recognize the realities of our needs, and to provide sufficient support to allow us to continue to move forward.

Thanks for listening. We welcome your questions or comments.