

October 23, 2018

Dear Tuxedo Union Free School District Board of Education Members,

We write this letter in response to Four Points Consulting's report entitled "Strategic Planning for George F. Baker High School: A Report to Tuxedo Union Free School District," dated September 18, 2018 (the "Consultant's Study"), and the decision that the Board of Education will make regarding the future of George F. Baker High School ("GFBHS") on November 15, 2018.

We begin by thanking the Members of the Board of Education for their hard work and service over the years. We recognize that the ability to provide the highest quality academic and social experience for our high school students is *the* priority for the Board and we commend each of you for recognizing your fiduciary responsibility to the school district by putting aside your personal biases when deciding on this very important issue.

The Board must approach the decision-making process regarding the future of GFBHS on a completely informed, rational and educated basis, where emotion, nostalgia and fear are held in abeyance. We trust that the Board fully understands the importance of an objective, facts-based analysis and have confidence that the Board will tackle this difficult decision in this manner.

The Board must pursue information and data in an exhaustive way, and critically review the Consultant's Study. The Consultant's Study should be used as a starting point for the analysis, but when conclusions in the report lack supporting data, the research is dated, or information is not included, it behooves the Board to seek out the necessary information to clarify, challenge, compare and conclude.

We respectfully submit that the fundamental question the Board must answer is:
In a fiscally responsible manner, what is the best approach to providing the high school aged children in our community with all three of the following critical components of a quality high school experience?

- (1) the highest quality education that best prepares our kids to achieve their dreams and be prepared for the world ahead of them
- (2) the most diversified and relevant co-curricular activities

(3) the generally desired social experience.

With the above in mind, we put forth the following information for the Board's consideration:

1. Over 50% of the District's High School Students are not Being Served:

The Consultant's Study indicated that about 20 high school aged children in the school district are choosing not to attend GFBHS.¹ Based on a census study conducted informally,² at least 60 high school aged children have been identified as choosing not to attend GFBHS, which represents over 50%³ of the high school aged children in our district. It is imperative that the Board acknowledge this dilemma and ask why is it that over half of the high school aged children in our community do not attend GFBHS?

Attachment B contains some letters from various families explaining why they opted out of attending GFBHS. *We ask the Board to please keep these letters confidential as some contain information on personal matters.* We recognize that these letters do not represent every family's point of view, but once again, in order to make an informed decision regarding the high school, it is essential to consider the points of view of both current student/student families *and* non-students and their families since all are community members and potential students of the high school. A recurring theme expressed within the letters is that GFBHS' tiny size inhibits students' social, academic and extracurricular opportunities as compared to the schools they are attending.

Much has been lauded by officials at GFBHS about the opportunity for all students to participate in all classes and activities. While that certainly benefits some, equally important is an environment that *pushes* students; challenges and motivates them to strive for a superior level of success. Achieving that level is harder to accomplish in a setting in which *participation* versus *mastery* is the goal. If the Board were to investigate the reasons why half the high school aged students in our district opt to attend other schools, it is likely that they would discover that many feel that GFBHS is

¹ Strategic Planning for George F. Baker High School: A Report to Tuxedo Union Free School District," dated September 18, 2018 (the "Consultant's Study"), p 7.

² See Attachment A for the demographics of the high school aged children in our district that are not attending GFBHS as of June 2017. The family names for each of these students has been supplied separately to the Board of Education.

³ The calculation is made based on the current GFBHS population of 58 children residing in the TUFSD.

too small/limited to provide an environment in which they feel they will be pushed to perform at a higher level.

In short, we strongly encourage the Board to consider not only the desires of the minority of children remaining in our district, but also the majority of children that are choosing *not* to attend GFBHS.

2. Neighboring Schools Outperform GFBHS on Important Metrics:

The Consultant's Study notes that GFBHS is "a high performing and innovative school"⁴ and provides a "high-quality education"⁵ comparable to many neighboring schools. Unfortunately, the Consultant's Study does not provide sufficient supporting data for these statements, other than statewide analysis on only a few metrics. Performance metrics, such as reading and math proficiency, AP passing exam numbers, ACT/SAT scores, should be collected and reviewed and GFBHS should be compared, not with statewide averages, but with the performance by the four (4) neighboring high schools identified by the consultant, namely Monroe-Woodbury High School, Northern Highlands Regional High School ("NHRHS"), Ramsey High School and Suffern High School (the "Comparison Schools"). Such comparisons will show that:⁶

- The percentage of passing AP grades of GFBHS students significantly lags our neighboring schools: 30% lower than Monroe, Suffern and Ramsey and 40% lower than NHHS
- Proficiency in reading and math for GFBHS is about 25% lower than Monroe and Suffern
- GFBHS student's SAT scores are lower by between 110 and 200 points

Breadth and Depth of Classes

The consultants state that GFBHS "offers a similar academic program and set of elective opportunities"⁷ as the Comparison Schools. When examined more closely, there are apparent differences that weaken that statement. For instance, both GFBHS and NHRHS offer film studies and editing, but NHRHS has more extensive video production rooms and equipment than GFBHS offers. Also, it has been reported that GFBHS offers some classes and extracurricular activities on a rotating basis (once every three years?) so the comparison that the consultants did is very likely more apples to oranges, than a like-by-like analysis.

⁴ Consultant's Study, p.10.

⁵ Consultant's Study, p.32.

⁶ See attachment C for details of information and sources.

⁷ Consultant's Study, p. 10.

We urge the BOE to visit NHRHS, Ramsey High School and Suffern High School (the “Option Schools”) and meet with their Superintendents to gain a firsthand comparison of the similarities and differences in opportunities provided at GFBHS and the Option Schools.

3. How Small is Too Small?

The Consultant’s Study referenced research supporting the fact that small schools provide many benefits to students.⁸ It highlighted that the research concluded that the optimal school size is 75 children in each grade, or 300 students in a high school.⁹ With 63 students, one needs to question whether the research and conclusions regarding the benefits of small schools are relevant for GFBHS, as a *very* small school not meeting the criteria for optimal school size as referenced, and whether our school size has become a detriment.

When one looks at the available research related to very small schools, the key takeaways from that research include:¹⁰

- Very small schools do not perform better than small or mid-size schools
- Very small schools are difficult to monitor and hold accountable due to small sample sizes
- Performance gaps are evident for important subgroups and subject areas. Admissions to highly selective schools could be affected due to limit in extracurricular activities

The Board must consider that at some point benefits attributed to GFBHS for being a small school may not be a realistic assessment because of the school’s size and/or outweighed by the disadvantages of being too small.

4. Impact on Property Values:

Despite being given the charge to examine the impact on property values of closing GFBHS, which is an important issue to *all* residents of Tuxedo, the consultant’s

⁸ It should be noted that almost all the research on small schools cited in the Consultant’s Study was based on a study (*Dollars and Sense: The Cost effectiveness of Small Schools*) generated in 2002 and chiefly based on the research done prior to 1999. The research was done by two nonprofit organizations and an architectural firm and was focused on rural and urban schools.

⁹ Consultant’s Study, p. 31.

¹⁰ *When is Small to Small? Efficiency, Equity & the Organization of Vermont Public Schools*, Bruce D Baker, Rutgers University, Wendy I Geller, May, 2015, Vermont State Agency of Education and *How Small Is Too Small? An Analysis of School District Consolidation*, Mac Taylor, May 2011, California Legislative Office, Legislative Analyst’s Office.

analysis was cursory at best. An in-depth analysis of districts/communities that do NOT have a high school within their borders is essential to appropriately assess the *real* risks to property values. Careful analysis is likely to reveal that not having a high school in a community does not negatively affect property values when students are offered a choice among strong high schools. Moreover, property values could very well be enhanced by providing students with options.

Quality of Schools Matter

According to the over 7,600 home buyers surveyed in 2017 by the National Association of Realtors, the 2nd most important factor in choosing a home when there are children under the age of 18 live in the household is the “Quality of School District.”¹¹ Also, “Quality of Schools” is not a “compromise” people are willing to make; they simply will not buy the house if the schools aren’t acceptable (only 4% of all buyers were willing to compromise) whereas they are willing to compromise on house cost (21%) and condition of home (18%).¹²

Regional High Schools are Common in Our Area

There are many towns in our area (i.e. Sloatsburg, Wyckoff, Oakland, Ringwood, Saddle River and Ho-Ho-Kus) that do not have high schools in their borders where the children attend a regional high school. The property values don’t appear to be hurt by this approach. In fact, many would argue that property values have increased in some of these communities because of strong elementary and middle school programs, combined with access to well-reputed High Schools in neighboring towns.

Examples of Districts that Tuition Out High School Students

Three (3) school districts in our area (Ho-Ho-Kus, Saddle River and Pocantico Hills School Districts) “tuition out” their children to a high school in another district and should be studied by the BOE.

Pocantico Hills School District in Westchester which covers “bits” of several towns¹³, is a relatively small district with about 450 children, 140 of whom are in high school. The school district gives their high school students a choice among three (3) very good high schools (Briar Cliff High School, Pleasantville High School or Sleepy Hollow High School) to attend. The district focuses on making its primary and middle school

¹¹ National Association of Realtors, “Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers 2017,” pp 38.

¹² Ibid, pp 46 & 47.

¹³ “If You’re of Living In/Pocantico Hills; Simple Living Near the Rockerfellers,” by Cheryl Platzman Weinstock, New York Times, April 29, 2001.

exceptional. Advertising for properties in that area of Westchester makes a distinction as to whether the home is located in the Pocantico Hills Central School District or not.

The BOE should examine districts/communities, neighboring and otherwise, that send their high school students to regional high schools (Pocantico Hills, Saddle River and Ho-Ho-Kus) for factual *information* on the impact on property values, as well as to better assess risks pertaining to long term tuition hikes, loss of school board representation and students/families' feelings of not belonging.

6. Potential Reinvestment in George Grant Mason ("GGM") Elementary School:

The BOE should make it clear that the discussion and decision that they are to vote on November 15, 2018 is *not* about closing the Tuxedo school district, nor GGM, nor abandoning any of the school buildings. The decision is only about tuitioning out the 58 high school students currently in the district (does not include the 5 students who currently tuition in to GFBHS) to a neighboring high school.

Incrementally, the BOE should seriously consider the value that the possible savings identified by the consultants (~\$1mm) through tuitioning Tuxedo's high school students out to a nearby school could bring to GGM. Were some or all of that money reinvested into enhancing the elementary and middle schools, how greatly could GGM be enriched and what might that do to the desirability of attending Tuxedo's schools and the appeal of living in our community?

The BOE should provide clarity regarding the vote they will be taking on November 15th to avoid misunderstanding among the community and should seriously consider the potential benefit to GGM of an approximate \$1 mm infusion into its program were the high school to close.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we ask the Board for the following:

- Fact-Based Decision: To consider all the issues noted above in their decision-making on the future of GFBHS and to put aside their own personal situations when voting on the future of George F. Baker High School ("GFBHS"). The decision MUST be made on a completely informed, rational and facts-based basis, where emotion, nostalgia and fear are held in abeyance.

- Refute Statements of Conjecture: Refute statements of conjecture, such as “once closed, the high school could not be reopened” and “once a tuitioning in contract expired, the receiving district would have all the leverage and raise the cost dramatically.”
- Compare School Metrics: Review statistics of all schools under consideration with regard to AP test scores, SAT/ACT test scores, Regents Diploma standings where applicable.
- Visit Option Schools: Visits by the Board to the Option Schools to judge for themselves the differences in offerings, culture and environment so that they may be in the best position to make informed decisions.

Respectfully submitted,

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Attachment A

Tuxedo High School Aged Students Currently Not Attending GFBHS	
Grade	# of students
12	14
11	15
10	15
9	16
Total	60

Attachment B

Letters from Families

Because personal matters were shared by some of the authors, we have removed the letter from this version of the Open Letter. The Letters from the Families were shared with the members of the Board of Education and the Superintendent and requested to be held in confidence.

Attachment C

School	# of students	National /State School Ranking	Graduation Rate	Proficient Reading	Proficient Math	Student Teacher Ratio	AP Exam pass Rate	2018 SAT Scores	2017 SAT Scores
GFB	*116	B+/8 in Orange County	95%	75%	75%	8:01	53%	***1082	1105
Monroe	**2308	A/#3 in Orange County	94%	99%	99%	16:01	82%	1190	1106
Suffern	**1488	A+/#1 in Rockland County	95%	98%	97%	14:01	84%	1220	1125
Ramsey	**858	A/1131 in best high schools in america	99%	Students permitted to refuse testing	Students permitted to refuse testing	10:01	84%	1210	1208
NH Regional	**1334	A+/#4 in Bergen County	99%	Students permitted to refuse testing	Students permitted to refuse testing	12:01	94%	1280	1248
Source Document	Niche 2019 *reflects grades 7-12 ** Reflects grades 9-12 *** max based on seneca falls could be negotiated lower	Niche 2019	Niche 2019	Niche 2019	Niche 2019	Niche 2019	US News and World Report	Niche 2019 ***provided by superintendent of GFB	2017 SAT scores NJ https://patch.com/new-jersey/tomsriver/new-jersey-sat-scores-released-every-high-school-ranked 2017 SAT scores NY https://www.newyorkupstate.com/schools/2018/04/compare_2017_sat_scores_at_more_than_600_upstate_ny_school_districts.html?appSession=5E0RYH9A7W02JM4DC4CU89NW5F577PSAE77753WF99T181V3ZYTQ5DXLC37453MR5078V22HND372F4T54T57WE084K2AD3174V76807LQH3M092A8540AC864FKN8BG