

The Need for More Town Support

By Head of School Tim Seeley, publication in The Weekly Packet, Castine Patriot, and Island Advantages anticipated.

Last week, GSA's trustees and I began to host a series of town forums, open to all town residents, to help provide more information about GSA's request for a tuition increase from tuitioning towns. Many people have made room in their busy lives to attend their town's forum and to learn about this important decision facing our towns. At the beginning of each forum we have handed out an FAQ—Frequently Asked Questions—intended to anticipate the questions and concerns uppermost in people's minds. I'd like to underscore here some of these questions, and our answers, and also point you to the full document to read online if you wish.

What's the problem? The background is simple enough: Maine law requires towns without their own public schools to pay their resident students' tuition, based on a minimum tuition number set by the Department of Education. Towns are required to pay this tuition to any school their students choose to attend, whether public or independent (so long as the school is non-sectarian). The minimum tuition the state sets is well below the per-student costs not only of GSA, but of most public high schools in our area. Although GSA has for years managed to “close the gap” between the state-set tuition and what it costs us to educate our towns' children, we can't do it any longer. That's what's pushed us come to towns to ask for a tuition increase.

What changed? Why can't GSA make ends meet any more? Actually, closing the tuition gap has been a challenge for many years, and was one of the reasons GSA began an international boarding program back in 2005. That program not only added cultural diversity to our school, it brought significant revenue, enough to pay to run the boarding program *and* produce a surplus to supplement our publicly-paid tuition. But the international admissions picture has changed dramatically, affecting schools everywhere. It was great while it worked, but attracting a critical mass of full-pay boarding students generating sizeable surpluses is no longer realistic.

Doesn't GSA have other sources of revenue? Yes. As an independent school we have a modest endowment whose income has helped supplement our public tuition revenue. Our annual GSA Fund campaign enjoys broad support across the community, and donations to it go directly into our annual operating budget. We have also secured grants from foundations to develop new programs and have raised money to meet capital expenses. Increased public tuition revenue will go a long way towards helping us meet the costs of educating our students, but we will continue to aggressively pursue fundraising opportunities to benefit students today and for years to come.

What increase is GSA asking for? For next year, we are asking for an additional \$300 per publicly-funded student, which will increase residents' taxes by \$2 to \$7 per \$100k valuation depending the town they live in. Then, during the coming year, we intend to work together with town officials to sort out issues involved in achieving the public tuition level we need to fulfill students' needs now and well into the future.

What will happen if towns don't provide GSA with more tuition? The short answer, of course, is that GSA will need to change. Our mission is admittedly ambitious—to be the high

school of choice for all students in our towns, whether they go right to work after high school or pursue vocational or college education after they graduate. But without the tuition needed to sustain and improve what we offer students, we will have to pare our ambitions, serving fewer students less of what they need to succeed.

The FAQ we have shared at town forums raises and answers more questions, and offers more detailed answers: *What budget cuts have we made already? How much tuition increase are we asking for, and for how long? How does elementary school funding compare with high school funding? How will the proposed increase affect my taxes? How do GSA's salaries and costs compare with those of other Maine high schools?* You can read our FAQ at georgestevensacademy.org/TownTuitionFAQ. Or come by GSA's front desk and pick up a copy. And please, come to your town's forum!