Non-Resident Students, Good or Bad?

Montana law defines a non-resident student as one "whose parent or legal guardian does not live within the school district of attendance of that student." Thompson Falls Public Schools has 74 non-resident students in grades K-12 with 63 at the high school and 11 at the elementary and junior high schools. This may seem unusual to those who live outside the Thompson Falls area but to those who live here it is something that has been going on since the early1920s.

An article in the "Missoulian" last June entitled, "Old School" describes the history of the schools in Thompson Falls as one that has always relied on non-resident students. Almost 200 students were housed in the school district by 1939. According to early records and an interview with Jim and Mike Freed, "Tribal students, homeless students, from isolated rural farms on the Hi Line, even problem students from rich families back east were welcome at the Thompson Falls dormitories."

The Thompson Falls Boarding School prospectus of 1922 stated, "The school officials of Thompson Falls will not undertake to turn bad boys or girls into good boys or girls. Incorrigible students will be dismissed as soon as they are discovered. But good students are welcome, whoever they may be or wherever they live." Not much has changed over the past eighty years except that the non-resident students now live in therapeutic homes and do not live on campus.

State law requires that all non-resident students be treated the same. In other words, program students must be given the same opportunities and treatment as someone who lives in Trout Creek but elects to attend Thompson Falls High School instead of at Noxon, their high school of residency.

The district is currently assessing the impact of non-resident students on the high school. In gathering information and looking at non-resident students, data was gathered on three different sub-groups. These sub-groups are: 1. students who live in homes set-up specifically to handle students with special challenges (commonly called program students); 2. students who did not originate from Thompson Falls Junior High School but are not termed a program student, and 3. students who advanced from TFJHS. At the current time, there are six facilities that house 38 program students. These include 20 Peak Ranch, Building Bridges, Explorations, ELP-Explorations, Buena Vista, and Montana Pathways. Students in these homes come from all parts of the country.

The high school staff under the direction of Don Jensen, high school principal, is meeting with his staff and program student directors to answer several questions. Are program students a positive or negative impact on the high school? Are there more discipline problems with these students? Do these students have higher or lower grade point averages and how do they score on the state tests? Should there be a cap on the number of non-resident students who attend the district?

Information gathered at this time to these questions indicate that **program students perform and behave at par with local students**. For the school year of 2002-03, it was found that the average grade point for program students was 2.98 compared to 3.00 for those who graduated from TFJHS, while those students who were neither a program student nor graduated from TFJHS obtained a 2.48 grade point average. For the same time period, the program students scored the highest on the state proficiency tests in reading, language arts, and social studies. They scored lower though compared to those students who graduated from TFJHS in the tested areas of math and science but higher than those students who attend high school that did not graduate from TFJHS and who are not in a program home.

SENATE PUBLIC HEALTH, WELFARE & SAFETY

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For 2003-04, the grade point averages for first semester indicated that those who graduated from TFJHS obtained a GPA average of 3.00 while the program students received a GPA of 2.85. The remainder of the students had a GPA average of 2.93. Looking at this information in more detail indicates that the average GPA of all females in the high school was 3.29 while the GPA for all males was 2.76. This is important when one realizes that all but 3 program students are males. Therefore, the grade point average of male program students is above the male average in the high school.

Discipline violations for the 2003-04 school year through mid-February indicate that 89% of all discipline violations are committed by males. In comparing resident male students to program male students, one finds that program male students commit one violation per student while non-program male students commit 1.55 violations per student. Therefore, program students commit fewer discipline problems than the rest of the student body on a percentage basis.

An important point to be made, however is that only 38% of the high school and 43% of students in grades K-8 at Thompson Falls are females. The ratio of males to females at TFHS is almost 2 to 1. **The gender of a student may be a better indicator as to the overall academic performance and behavior at the high school than the residency of the student.**

Financially, all non-resident students provide additional revenue for the high school, with each student bringing in $5,371 for the 2004-05 school year. Approximately $300,000 would be taken from the high school budget if the district did not allow non-resident students to attend the Thompson Falls Public Schools. Without non-resident students the curriculum, staffing patterns, scheduling, and activity offerings would be drastically reduced. The high school would have to go back to a seven period day, reduce five instructors, cut back activities by $50,000, and push some of the shared costs of the elementary campus back within the elementary budget. This would result in $68,500 to be cut from the K-8 campus. The high school would go from an enrollment of 250 students to under 200. Class offerings would decrease and class sizes would go up if there was a moratorium on accepting non-resident students. To justify the financial costs for educating non-resident students, especially those from outside Montana, one can use the rationale of Montana receiving one of the highest ratios of federal dollars from the federal government for each federal tax dollar paid compared to other states. In a way, Montana and Thompson Falls Public Schools do receive tax dollars to educate out-of-state students.

A meeting was held on March 9th between the program directors and the high school staff to discuss this information and other issues that may help improve communications between the program students and their staff, and the TFHS staff, and resident students of the Thompson Falls High School. The challenge for district staff to develop a positive culture between students from 15 states with different economic and cultural backgrounds is one that TFHS staff and the program directors are addressing with optimistic realism. Changes will be made that will allow all high school students to better learn and profit from their educational experiences in Thompson Falls.

Two articles per month will continue to be written over the next two months to make Thompson Falls residents more aware of what is happening in their schools. Hopefully this will improve communication between the Thompson Falls Public Schools and the community about its educational system. If there are any questions about this article, or any other concerns about the Thompson Falls Schools, then please contact me at 827-3323 (wk) or 827-3677 (hm).

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