

Why Can't It be the Way it Always Was? An Analysis of the Potential Impact of Losing Corbett Charter School

I have been overwhelmed recently by the creative thinking of the Corbett Schools community. While the district and the Board continue to analyze all possible avenues to overcome our district's massive budget shortfall, our school community is doing their part to investigate solutions as well. This partnership truly is more important than ever in helping Corbett School District preserve the quality education we all seek for our children.

Prior to seeking new ways to increase funding to our district, we're working diligently to pinpoint any opportunity to reduce expenses, though we already lead our peers in operational cost efficiency. Regardless, we have to identify all opportunities to make cost cuts, and then fully investigate these proposed opportunities. It is my commitment to perform the necessary, responsible due diligence in investigating any possible solution for preserving our district's successes. To this end, I would like to directly address a proposal put forth to make dramatic cuts to the district's costs: dissolving Corbett Charter School.

The Good Old Days:

When I came to Corbett seven years ago there were 50 percent fewer students in the district and at least 25 percent more employees. In retrospect those were the good old days; though at the time people remembered five years before that when there were 25 percent *more* employees, more money available per student, smaller class sizes by 30 percent, more programs, etc.

Since then Corbett has become recognized as one of the highest performing districts in the state; indeed in the country. This performance is registered by incremental increases year upon year in student achievement scores, as well as post-high school success, thanks in large part to our school community's commitment to academically rigorous courses.

Throughout these years, significant change has occurred. Change is hard. It is common nature to resist change, particularly when the situation is not dire. Throughout the last seven years, Corbett School District's academic situation has been far from dire, largely because of the efforts of the staff and school board to shield students from the dire educational landscape all over the state. So, every change has been challenging....it is hard to change when you are doing well. Despite the challenges of implementing change, we have changed, and for the better. We do more with less and at a higher level. Few could ask for more.

Still, change is hard. I guarantee that adding Corbett Charter School and all of its students is not any staff member's or board member's first choice. It is something we had to do to keep the district afloat, to continue educating our students to the very best of our abilities. It would have been far easier to maintain our student services with increased funding from the federal government, state government or local sources. But those resources were not available so we made do with the only other resource we could....increased student enrollment via a charter school.

Questions about the Charter:

As with any significant change brought to a decades-old institution, the type of change brought about by the addition of the Charter School is understandably hard for some to embrace. The parking

lot is awfully crowded and people see cars and students they don't recognize. Rumors swirl about where the charter school's funds are going, or whether the charter is the reason that class sizes have grown. "Isn't it true that the charter was supposed to save us and now look at it?!"

One way to answer these questions would be to imagine that the Corbett Charter School did not exist. We could try to plan life without it and see where we are. In an effort to help us all understand this proposal, I have examined this scenario in great detail to better show the reality that would face our district without Corbett Charter School. The following illustrates the examination of my investigation.

Scenario: 2011 Without Corbett Charter School:

It is August 2011 and school is about to start for the first time this year. As people pull into the parking lot the first thing they notice is how few cars there are compared to last year. Drop off time is considerably shorter. This will not be the only change people notice.

Throughout the day students will notice that about one third of their friends and classmates are gone. For some students, these are friends they have had since they were in Kindergarten more than a decade ago. These missing friends are most apparent during lunch and recess for students in grade K-5, throughout largest sections of the day for students in grades 6-9, and in every period for a 10-12th grade student.

Students will not just be missing their friends. They will also notice that most of the teachers are gone. The older kids will miss teachers that they have known for more than a decade. Of course with most of the teachers gone class size has grown across all grades. Most classes will crest 40 students or more, with a small class at any grade level being above 30 students.

The phrase "most of the teachers are gone" might seem shocking or hard to believe but unfortunately it is true in this scenario. Let's analyze how this happened. Going into the 2011-2012 school year, Corbett School was looking at cutting approximately 575K out of the budget; with the Charter School eliminated, another 450K (apx.) needs to be eliminated from the budget due to the loss of rent income and other services previously purchased by Corbett Charter School. Furthermore, all of the charter teachers are gone; this includes Mr. Swanson, Mrs. Ducey, Mr. Robertson, Mr. Dunton, Ms. Hedger, and Mrs. Swanson in the high school.

In this scenario, we are now faced with more than 1 million dollars to cut and six high school teachers to replace. The first step to take is to trim the fat.

Trimming the Fat

Comparing where we are now with seven years ago will be instructive as to where to look for fat to trim. With the Corbett Charter School's students gone, and all of the charter teachers gone, Corbett School District's student population is almost identical to what it was seven years ago. Other than student population little else is the same. Compared to seven years ago, today's Corbett Schools feature:

- fewer teachers
- fewer classroom aides
- fewer custodians
- fewer maintenance personnel

- fewer administrators
- fewer paid coaches
- fewer people working in the office
- fewer people working in the kitchen
- fewer opportunities for students to access off campus specialty programs
- fewer supplies available to use in the classroom

In short, there is less of practically every human resource than there was seven years ago. Unfortunately, the biggest change between now and seven years ago is that there are now far fewer state dollars per student available to Corbett School District.

While most resources have decreased over the past seven years, other items have increased over that same time period. Unfortunately the things that have increased are almost universally costs. Over the past seven years, the following items have risen in cost:

- Classroom supplies
- Electricity
- Heating fuel
- Gasoline for busing
- Health insurance (most Corbett employees participate in the lowest cost insurance program available to them, but these costs have still skyrocketed)
- PERS (scheduled next year)
- Off-Campus specialty programs
- Professional development
- Requirements to test students (these have increased, which also costs money)
- Requirements to report to the state and the federal government (these have increased, which also costs money)
- The minimum education we must provide (this has increased, which also costs money)

In fact, almost every thing the District purchases costs more now than it did seven years ago. In short we do virtually everything more efficiently now than we did seven years ago, when we were already lean. The fat has long since been trimmed, so it is time to trim muscle and bone.

Amputation

When we look at opportunities to cut costs, it's important to know that all of these cuts will be Draconian. Some are even worse than Draconian and will not be considered; we'll look at these first.

- We have two custodians; it seems absurd to consider reducing to one.
- We have one maintenance worker; I can not imagine reducing to zero.
- Most of our student transportation services are paid for by the government, so it seems unreasonable to cut something that is mostly paid for by an outside source.
- We only have two full time administrators (one of which is me) to cover the district administrative load, school administrative load, and Special Education Administrative load.
- We have one teacher who works .7 time making sure we are in compliance with all state testing and state reporting. Without this position we would be out of compliance with the State.
- We have one grade school secretary who also drives bus and deals with the federal free and

- reduced lunch program.
- We have one HS/MS secretary who also handles all student accounts and helps with mandated services. (10 years ago this was the job of three people)
- We have one board secretary who is currently doing the job that three people were doing seven years ago.

These areas seem to have been cut well past the fat and to the bone already. So, what is left to cut? Mostly just teachers.

Before proceeding further, I want to make it clear that this is a thought experiment. This is not a plan and it is only meant for a point of reference and not to indicate something for which I am advocating.

First, we could cut the remainder of all paid coaches which would save us about 55K. Then we could cut the athletic director position and all travel, supplies, etc. associated with athletics. This would bring us to around 110K in total cuts...or about 10 percent of the way there. To be clear this would mean removing *all* athletics from Corbett. We could not sponsor a team or provide transportation, so there wouldn't be athletics at Corbett. Outside groups would be free to rent facilities such as the football field but the district would not pay for any upkeep of the grounds. Nor could the district pay to have the gyms or the locker room cleaned after each event. As a former basketball and wrestling coach and person who loves to watch sports it would be very hard to say goodbye to the Cardinals.

Next, we would have to make a decision about grade school and middle school music and band. There is no requirement by the state that we provide a fine art specialist to these grades so these would have to go. However, if you don't have a grade school and middle school program feeding into your high school band and choir program you can never expect to compete at the state level like Corbett has for more than a decade. It is hard to stomach that the defending State Band championship program would face the brutal ax of cutting, but such is the case in this thought experiment.

Some would point out that at the high school level you have to have a fine art to graduate so there would be bitter infighting between whether it was wise to cut band or art; in all likelihood art would win as it is far cheaper to offer --a paint brush is cheaper than a trumpet. Not only would it be sad to cut these two programs but it would represent a burden on every other teacher in the building. This cut will represent a savings of about 140K bringing the total up to 250K, or about 25 percent of the way there. Sadly, both of these cuts will effect every other classroom in the district. These two teachers, Mrs. Swanson and Mr. Killgore, see more students per day than any other teacher on campus. With these teachers gone, their students will have to go somewhere, so those remaining will have to shoulder the load. Furthermore, I can not imagine walking by quiet rooms where I used to hear dozens of happy voices raised in song, or feeling the thrill I get when the symphonic band plays a piece that few bands in the state could possibly attempt.

If you are being mercenary, and without Corbett Charter School we would have to be, we need to look at programs on campus that serve special populations. The first program for special populations that would need to be eliminated would be our high school alternative program. From a dollar per student perspective it is costly. Granted, about four percent of the high school population needs this experience to have a shot at graduating but that four percent costs an entire teacher. This will save us about 75K but cost us about four percent in our graduation rate. One of the things that tugs at my heart strings the most is when a student has really struggled to get through school, but they're able

to make it because of an alternative program. There will be fewer tugs on my heart strings. We are up to 325K.

Next, we will need to look at our special education program. Currently, we have two special education teachers who, along with classroom aides, serve about 42 students. Classroom aides serve two very important services. First, they help with special education students and second they supervise lunch and recess. It is conceivable that we could eliminate one special education teacher, have the classroom aides spend less time at recess and lunch and more time on their special education duties. This will mean that teachers must watch recess and lunch. This will be problematic as this is currently teachers' prep periods, which are provided by aides supervising lunch and recess. In the new model teachers will have to watch each other's classrooms while they supervise large groups of students at recess and lunch. The entire grade school and middle school schedule will be compromised and it is entirely conceivable that a teacher could be in charge of 90 students in the classroom at a time. This will save another 75K bringing the total down to 400K.

Now the cuts start to get really hard. State graduation requirements coupled with highly qualified teacher requirements make high school an expensive endeavor. You must provide fine art or second language, English, math, social studies, health, physical education, science, and more obscure topics. Within subjects such as math and social studies you must have people highly qualified to teach biology, chemistry, physics, general science, and earth science. The list of requirements is daunting and expensive. The consequence for not providing a complete high school education is ultimately a dissolution of the school district.

If we cut one primary teacher, one intermediate teacher, one middle school teacher, and one high school science teacher, we could save about another 300K.....bringing us to a total of 700K. This is still 300K short, which means we will have to execute these cuts again. By cutting one more primary teacher, one more intermediate teacher, one more middle school teacher, and one more high school teacher we will have reached our one million dollar cut threshold.

What Does it Look Like After the Amputation?

Now that we've managed to get our cost down to the break-even point, we can stand back and survey the landscape. Unfortunately, the view inside our classrooms will not reflect the scenic backdrop behind our school buildings.

At the primary end of campus we will only have three teachers. All-day kindergarten is a thing of the past. Even with Kindergarten students coming to school every other day, class size will have expanded over 40 in primary classrooms. Meanwhile, class size at the elementary and middle school levels will be just below 50 with only three teachers teaching each level. Teacher prep time, recess, and lunch will be a real sticky situation to navigate. Conceivably one teacher could take a lunch and a prep period while another teacher watched two classrooms at recess, lunch, and perhaps in P.E. It seems hard to believe that there could be periods of the day where one teacher could be in charge of teaching 90+ students; unfortunately this would be the case. Classroom aides would still be available to help as they could, but their time will primarily be allocated to working with Special Education students so that resource will be minimal.

As different as the grade school and middle school would look, the high school would even be more dramatically affected. After all of the cutting we have done we would be down to 6.5 teachers in the high school. Culinary arts, band, choir, and the high school alternative program would all be gone.

In order to provide the breadth of course offerings we must provide a dramatic change in the high school schedule. Subsequently, we would have to structure high school more like we do middle school.

Students, without regard to their grade level, would all take the same courses each year. Subject area courses would be on a four year rotation. In science it could be biology, chemistry, physics, and environmental science. In social studies the rotation could be US history, world history, government/economics, and human geography. Math would be taught in a math lab situation with students working on various courses at the same time. Everyone would take Spanish in multi-age Spanish courses for four years. Art, PE, Health, and one elective course would constitute a rotation. Every student would take four years of AP English, two of AP literature and two of AP language. All student choice with regard to course selection would be eliminated. This may not be a bad thing. First it would save hundreds of hours of scheduling, second it would insure that every student got four years of each subject. Each student would likely take twelve AP tests in their career still leaving a Corbett graduate at the top of all students in the country.

Preparation for teachers would be easier with only one prep each, but the student load would be miserably high. Each teacher would see every high school student every day. If you were the only English teacher in this model and you assigned a written assignment that took a half hour to grade, you could expect to spend more than 110 hours grading papers that weekend. Obviously, this could be a problem as there are not 110 hours in a three day weekend. In short, the current high quality of instruction and feedback would have to change. But even with creative changes that high school teachers would undoubtedly create the work load would be oppressive. The sheer weight of teaching that many high school students a day would wear on a teacher.

It is hard to guess what the atmosphere amongst the staff would be. The teachers at Corbett, both Charter and District, are wonderful people who I am sure would strive to provide the best education they possibly could. Still, they would have seen 14 of their colleagues in the form of Charter teachers leave the building over the summer, as well as one special education teacher, two music teachers and eight additional teachers. In total, 25 teachers would be gone, leaving just 15.5 to teach more than 600 students.

Would They Stay?

Currently, Corbett School District is a destination for students and staff. People want to come to Corbett both to learn and to work. The housing market in Corbett reflects the power of the district to draw people to our district. However, if we dissolved the Corbett Charter School, it is likely that both staff and students would move on. The drain on teacher quality would continue as more and more institutional knowledge and expertise gained through years of experience moved away.

Parents too would likely look for greener educational pastures across the Sandy River. As more students left, more staff would need to be reduced. A slow spiral into district disillusionment would begin.

Why Can't it Be the Way it Always Was?

The simple reason that it can not be the way it always was is that Corbett is not funded the way it always was. I wish that we were. Without Corbett Charter School we would be looking at an apocalyptic scenario next year; even with the charter we have to deal with nearly 600K in cuts which will be incredibly challenging to accommodate, but not nearly as challenging as it would be without the

Corbett Charter School.

While Corbett Charter School is saving Corbett School District right now, it certainly does not mean that there are not trade-offs associated with the Charter. Yes, the parking lot is full, yes the traffic is bad, yes there are new people in the district, but these are *inconveniences*, not problems that lead to Corbett Schools dissolving as a school district.

Proviso

Predicting the future is difficult. This exercise was performed using the best available information that we have *right now*. If federal, state and/or local funding materializes next year, the situation will not be as bad as I have outlined in this document. On the other hand, funding could come in less than I have predicted in this scenario, and if so, our situation will be even worse.

Corbett Charter School is not going away next year; which is a good thing. Because no matter what happens with funding next year things would be worse at Corbett without the rent and services they pay for, as well as the six teachers that teach at the high school. Analyzing what would happen if Corbett Charter School was dissolved was meant to illustrate the point that without the charter we would be in far worse straits than we currently find ourselves. Rumors about the Charter causing our increased class size, or that the Charter is somehow taking more than their fair share of state funding, are only rumors with no basis in fact.

Without the Corbett School District, Corbett Charter School could obviously not exist. It is my hope that this document illustrates the converse point that without Corbett Charter School, Corbett School District would be in pretty miserable straits as well.

It is imperative that we as a school community continue to work together to understand the breadth of our current funding crisis, while not losing sight of our goal of preserving excellence. What we have here in Corbett is truly worth preserving and we must continue to investigate every possible means to retain that which makes us strong. I encourage you to please continue bringing your care, insight and passion to bear on this issue. And thank you for your continued commitment to Corbett School District.

Yours in education,

Randy Trani