

Dear FGCS Friends and Families,

Last evening we had a parent forum to discuss the future of our school. We weren't talking about the academic program, about what our students are learning or any of the many forces that impact a child's readiness to learn. Our conversation was about nothing as intellectually engaging as that. I wish it had been. What we talked about this evening was a very basic requirement for a school--a place for students and teachers to gather - i.e., about facilities. I called this meeting because I wanted to let parents know that we have come to a crossroads forced by the limitations of our space. Simply put: We do not have the space to continue to increase our enrollment.

Since we opened our doors two and a half years ago, we have worked to develop a plan to accommodate our fully enrolled program, which we hoped would be 250 to 270 students. For those who could not attend the meeting last night, here is a very brief history: When we moved into our building in Nov. 2007, we knew we wanted to grow and the building held great potential for expansion. Our landlord was committed to working with us to develop additional classrooms. Our plan for our second year, when we added three classrooms (Level 1, Level 2 and Level 4), was to renovate the third floor of our building. In June 2008, at the end of our first year, we learned that costs of renovating the third floor were much higher than expected so that the work could not be financed in a way that we could afford. At that point, we worked to secure the two modular classroom buildings that currently house our Level 3 and 4 students.

Since that time, we have worked to find a solution to the need for additional space as our program grew and student enrollment increased. We have met with local property owners, public charter school funding organizations and banks. Our facilities planning group has explored many options, including working with our current landlord to create the space we need. We have worked with our landlord, who has been extremely support of our school, to explore many different options for expansion through renovation or new construction. Despite those efforts, as of this letter, we have not been able to develop a financially viable plan.

This year our charter - the contract between FGCS and the Forest Grove School District that guides the development and operation of our school - is up for renewal. As part of the renewal process, the District has asked us to submit a three-year facilities plan and budget, which would include adding classroom spaces to accommodate our growing high school. Based on current facilities options, we cannot provide this plan for growth.

At this point, I believe that we must accept that the buildings we currently occupy are the only ones we can reasonably count on having for the near future. With our current enrollment structure, these spaces will not be sufficient to accommodate increased enrollment. Therefore, we cannot grow at this point -- that much is clear.

What is not yet clear is how we will restrict growth to deal with this reality. However, the options that are currently on the table all involve curtailing the high school program because (1) it is smallest part of our program and (2) it is not yet fully enrolled. For these reasons, it may well be that we decide to reduce or eliminate this part of our school. The strong, fully enrolled programs at Levels 1, 2 and 3 will not be reduced or eliminated.

I have to tell you that the very act of writing these words is painful for me. I love the high school. Working with the Level 4 teachers and students is immensely rewarding to me personally. To think of being at this school without those people is heartbreaking. But we may have to make that decision.

Today, FGCS board chair Jon Stagnitti and director of school operations Karen Torry and I met with representatives of a Portland bank that specializes in financing facilities for non-profit organizations and independent schools. We learned in this meeting that, although it may be possible to borrow money in the future to finance facilities, we do not yet have enough history as a school or adequate collateral to do so at this time.

All of this information will be presented to the FGCS board at its next meeting at 7 p.m. Tues., Feb. 9. The Board will consider the facts and the feelings expressed this evening, and will lead us forward through this challenging situation. As always, you are welcome to attend our board meetings, which take place at school and are open to the public. If you cannot attend and would like to send the board comments, please do so by sending an email to board@fgcschool.org.

Thanks to all of you who participated in the parent forum last night. I am grateful for the support you give our school and your students, and I appreciate your many thoughtful questions and ideas.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Gray
Principal