

## Derek DuBois, MD

### Perspectives on the Garrison Board of Education

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Here are my initial perspectives on the current state of the Garrison Union Free School, proposed aspiration and direction, the role of the board and the benefits to the community at large (parents, homeowners, taxpayers). I conclude with my background and qualifications to drive positive change as a board member.

#### **Aspiration**

GUFS has the ingredients to be a great school. It is fortunate to have a close-knit, involved parent community, a faculty made up of caring teachers and administrators, a small student body, and it is privileged to enjoy a beautiful setting and terrific facilities from buildings to sports fields to forest. It has a strong track record of performance on state tests, has successfully navigated myriad state requirements and has won Blue Ribbon status.

While GUFS is effective at teaching the core requirements, the curriculum and the teaching approach still heavily emphasize teacher directed learning rather than student driven inquiry.

Good schools effectively teach children facts and formulas. Great schools teach them to think for themselves, to solve ambiguous problems, to successfully navigate an uncertain world and to succeed in a knowledge driven economy that is moving light years faster than state curricular requirements. I believe that should be our aspiration.

## Challenges

Test scores are one measure of performance. Our test score performance is high relative to the average district in NY State. But that average includes the Bronx as well as Bronxville. I don't think average should be our benchmark. Comparison to communities I believe we should consider as socioeconomic and intellectual peers (such as but not limited to Chappaqua, Katonah, Bronxville, Scarsdale, Rye) suggests that we are at par with top school districts as far as test performance<sup>1</sup>. I don't think that we should focus much on test scores beyond that point – I do think we should focus on the substance of our children's education beyond preparing for state mandated multiple choice tests.

There are a number of concerns and challenges that suggest the status quo is not sufficient. Conversations with many parents and members of the Garrison community indicate a school with great strengths but with a substantial opportunity to improve the engagement, the experience, the curriculum, the professional development opportunities, the integration across disciplines, the use of the school forest (an incredible asset; but one school forest day a year is hardly integrating the forest into the curriculum) and the use of technology. The recent technology report was politely written but was frankly scathing in its assessment of the technology vision and the application of technology in our classrooms<sup>2</sup>. My view is that technology is a tool and a means to an end not the goal – but we are living in an increasingly information driven world and the effective use of technology in teaching should be an expectation not an aspiration.

Enrollment is important to the school for multiple reasons. While we all cherish the small school and small class size, we need sufficient enrollment in order to maximize state funding (which is distributed according to mind-numbingly complex formulae but actively linked to enrollment levels<sup>3</sup>) and maintain a sustainable school. A review of the school budget suggests that few of the key drivers of the budget (facility costs, administrative and faculty compensation, benefits, transportation, debt service<sup>4,5</sup>) vary meaningfully with a change in enrollment. Therefore decreased enrollment will impact state funding levels but will have little impact on the budgetary requirements necessitating painful cuts or higher taxes to compensate. Enrollment is down 24% since 2004-5 (295 to 222) and is down 18% in just the last 3 years<sup>6</sup>. Some of this may be due to fluctuations in demographics but if you take the 6:31 AM train south any weekday morning, you will see a pack of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders on the way to Masters. They represent hundreds of thousands of dollars a year that is being spent by parents with the means to send their children to private schools: parents who are voting with their feet and their wallets in spite of the substantial commute to any private school in the area. Not only is this a loss of attendance, participation and state revenue to GUFSS. It is also a loss of the very parents who have the financial means to contribute the most to the PTA, GCEF and other programs that enrich our curriculum and offerings for all students without further burdening all taxpayers.

## **Direction**

We do not need to re-invent the wheel to move forward. Hundreds of educators around the country and the world are working to define and evaluate teaching approaches that cover requirements *and* engage children more effectively in thinking, in learning and in integrating concepts across “subjects”. Many of the best examples are in New York in easy reach. In 2012, a group of parents proposed to the current board a task force that I am happy to report recently launched in order to study, learn from and adapt best practices in education.

I suggest that we rapidly build on these lessons to adapt our current approaches and augment the professional development for our faculty to include the latest and most effective methodologies.

We need to define and implement a clear vision for how to integrate technology more effectively into learning – and ideally how to integrate other resources such as the school forest into the day to day learning and not as a one day event during the year. Science classes for example could easily incorporate biology and ecosystem lessons in the forest without substantial planning, logistics or expense.

Formal changes to the curriculum require explicit decisions and need to be thoughtfully considered. In the meantime we must empower and encourage the faculty to embrace a more creative and integrated approach in their conveyance of the required core curriculum.

We can emphasize learning and problem solving without a lot of investment in books in equipment or in facilities. These changes are more about learning from and applying what works well elsewhere. It requires leadership, vision and motivation. The current budget per student is approximately 33% higher than the NY State average<sup>7</sup>. This reflects necessary investment and the higher proportional fixed costs of a small school. I don't think we need more investment. I do think we can continue to actively raise funds through the PTA and GCEF to augment the core budget and enrich our students' experience.

## **Role of the board**

The role of all boards, corporate and otherwise is to appoint leadership, to hold them accountable, to provide prudent checks and balances, and to make major decisions that shape the direction of the institution. Appointments, investments and budgets are the most critical of these. A good board finds great leadership, makes connections for them, supports and facilitates their work, catalyzes fundraising, and otherwise stays out of the way unless intervention is needed.

A school board is no different. The GUFFS Board of Education meets every other week, which is more frequent by far than most corporate boards. But the real work and the real leadership is driven day to day by the administration and the faculty of the school.

### **Benefits to the community**

A great school is obviously of enormous benefit to the children and their parents. But it is also a huge asset for the community. Property values are directly enhanced by terrific schools. Those who want to sell their homes find ready buyers among parents looking to move in to the district. Prudent management and stable enrollment keep taxes stable. The entire community supports the school but a great school gives back in spades to the entire community as well.

### **My qualifications**

I am not an education expert, but my experience in different schools has given me good perspective. After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, (B.A., English Literature), I was educated as a physician at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, and trained in Internal Medicine at NYU. My professional passion is in applying information systems to improve the cost and quality of US healthcare. I have worked as a management consultant and a partner at McKinsey & Company for the past 9 years. In that capacity I have advised the senior leadership and boards of hospitals, health insurers, pharmaceutical companies, investment funds, a university and a medical school on how to improve the performance of their respective institutions. I have extensive experience in that context with budgets and financial management, evaluation of investments and in driving change in all types of organizations. I also have deep familiarity with board and governance processes and with effectively influencing leaders to drive change.

My wife, Marit McCabe, and I have three children – Ava (10), Declan (6) and Magnus (4...correction, “4 ½, Dad”). I have been an active participant at GUFFS including co-chairing MAD Science week and working with a group of interested parents to propose a curriculum and professional development task force to the board.

I would be honored to represent this community on the Garrison Board of Education.

Thank you for your consideration.

## References

1. School test scores are more easily accessed and compared on this NY Times site than on NYSED.gov which supplies the underlying data

<http://projects.nytimes.com/new-york-schools-test-scores/about>

2. Sun Associates Instructional Technology Evaluation Report for GUFs

[http://www.gufs.org/site\\_res\\_view\\_folder.aspx?id=de6b73da-7d09-4873-9e5c-78e452f9d194](http://www.gufs.org/site_res_view_folder.aspx?id=de6b73da-7d09-4873-9e5c-78e452f9d194)

3. The link between enrollment levels and state funding is described in painful government language here

[https://stateaid.nysed.gov/budget/html\\_docs/combaidsa\\_1314.htm](https://stateaid.nysed.gov/budget/html_docs/combaidsa_1314.htm)

4. The GUFs 2013-14 budget proposal is available at

[http://www.gufs.org/site\\_res\\_view\\_folder.aspx?id=ad5a3792-7a6d-41ec-9556-77f3567e77c1](http://www.gufs.org/site_res_view_folder.aspx?id=ad5a3792-7a6d-41ec-9556-77f3567e77c1)

5. NY State educator compensation is more easily accessible here than at NYSED.gov

<http://rocdocs.democratandchronicle.com/database/educator-salaries-new-york>

6. Enrollment levels are included in State Report Cards at

<https://reportcards.nysed.gov/schools.php?district=800000039679&year=2012>

7. Spending per student is included in State Report Cards at

<https://reportcards.nysed.gov/schools.php?district=800000039679&year=2012>