

An Open Letter to the Freedom Area School District Community:

On Wednesday, June 7, Dr. Fuller, Mrs. Slavic, and I had the pleasure of spending several hours talking with a group of parents, listening to their concerns related to class size and other concerns that they had for their children.

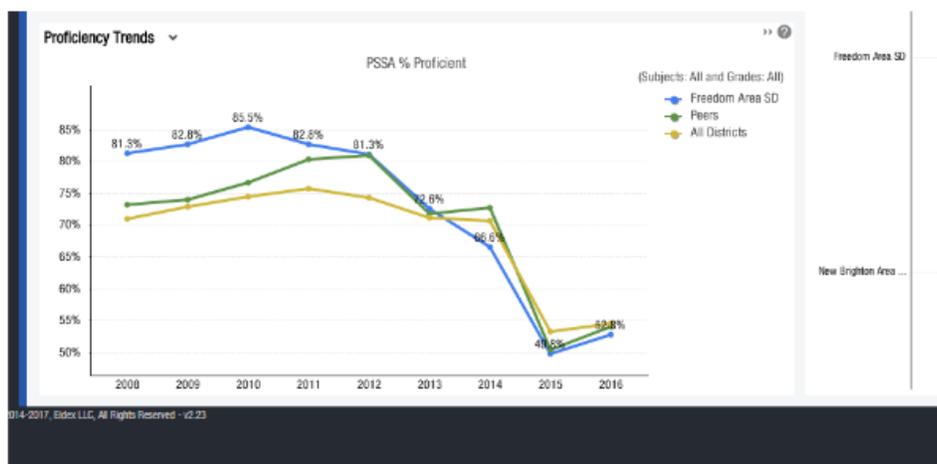
After that meeting, I spent several evenings specifically researching the value of class sizes versus the value of instructional coaching. In reviewing the information from the Star Project, what stood out to me was the age of the study. The research was performed in the mid- to late-80s with updated results as of 1999. There is no doubt that the Star Project was a significant study and held a lot of weight and validity during this time. However, the landscape of education and the teaching process has changed since then. For instance, in 2008 James Hattie performed a meta-study that assigned a weight or numeric value to the many aspects that influence learning outcomes in schools. This concept, called visible learning, focuses on which strategies and innovations are best utilized and where a school or district should concentrate their efforts to maximize student instruction. In his study, Hattie assigned values to 195 influences on student achievement. Of the top ten most effective influences, five (5) directly relate to the job of the instruction coach and the remainder could be directly or indirectly influenced by the information the coach provides. Class size ranks at 113th on that list.

To learn more about Hattie's work, please see the following:

<https://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>

During the meeting, there were several comparisons made between the Freedom Area School District and several other school districts within Beaver County, specifically the Southside Area School District and the New Brighton School District. Although there are differences between the districts in terms of staffing levels, expenditures per student, and other socio-economic factors, the achievement trends between the districts are very similar. While we agree that our achievement levels are not at the level that we want them to be, our teachers and administration have worked together to do a large amount of work to develop a sound, aligned instructional curriculum, select appropriate instructional resources, and to develop sound instructional methodologies. As the chart below shows, we are beginning to see the benefit from those efforts.

Proficiency Trends – FASD Compared to New Brighton/Southside and State



Year	Freedom Area SD	Peers	All Districts
2008	81.3%	73.3%	71.1%
2009	82.8%	74.0%	72.9%
2010	85.5%	76.8%	74.5%
2011	82.8%	80.4%	75.7%
2012	81.3%	81.0%	74.4%
2013	72.6%	71.8%	71.2%
2014	66.6%	72.7%	70.8%
2015	49.8%	50.4%	53.3%
2016	52.8%	54.0%	54.5%

As for the other items, we touched on at the meeting, I would like to share the data in context of the budget. One concern was the amount of district funding being spent for professional development. The Board and Administration feel that it is vitally important to keep our staff up to date on the appropriate instructional methods and resources. Due to this commitment, we send staff to various conferences, classes, and trainings throughout the school year. Additionally, and as needed, we work with outside vendors to provide professional development. However, we are careful to control those costs. The Administration works diligently to apply for as many grants as possible to support these efforts. Outside of grant funding, our professional development costs over the past four years averaged 1.06% of the overall budget. This includes travel expenses. This school year we used .25% overall budget for professional development. See the chart below for details of non-grant funded professional development over the last five (5) school years.

Professional Development as a Percentage of Annual Budget

Fiscal Year	Budget	Professional Development (Non-Grant)	PD as a % of Budget
2013-14	\$19,933,007	\$196,496	0.99%
2014-15	\$21,388,761	\$249,334	1.17%
2015-16	\$21,976,089	\$27,598	0.13%
2016-17	\$22,706,451	\$56,799	0.25%
2017-18	\$23,254,381	\$86,800	0.37%

A question was also raised related to the payment of bonuses to staff. The School Board does not generally provide bonuses for staff. However, in 2015 there were extraordinary circumstances that made the Board feel that it was necessary. During the Winter of 2014-2015, we experienced some extremely cold weather. Because of the extended very low temperatures, frozen pipes in the plumbing and HVAC systems caused a lot of damage through flooding and damaged classroom equipment. District maintenance and administrative staff spent many additional hours cleaning, assessing, and repairing damages, planning for and facilitating temporary classrooms for many students who were displaced by the damage, and working with contractors to facilitate many needed repairs. The efforts of these employees ultimately saved the district a great deal of money. Some employees were provided modest bonuses, while others elected to receive compensatory time for their efforts.

Additionally, I understand other concerns have been raised that I would like to address. Stipends, not bonuses, were given to staff members for stepping into interim roles that were above their normal job descriptions during times of transition. Teachers do not receive bonuses, as that would be a contract stipulation. The teachers did not negotiate in their contract language to include bonuses. They elected to receive an allocated annual distribution of their salary. Through the negotiation process, our teachers did agree to accept a one year wage freeze as part of their new (at the time) negotiated contract six years ago. This wage freeze was like one felt by school employees across the state due to

significant structural issues with the State budget that led to large cut-backs in general education funding provided to districts by the state. For additional information, please see:

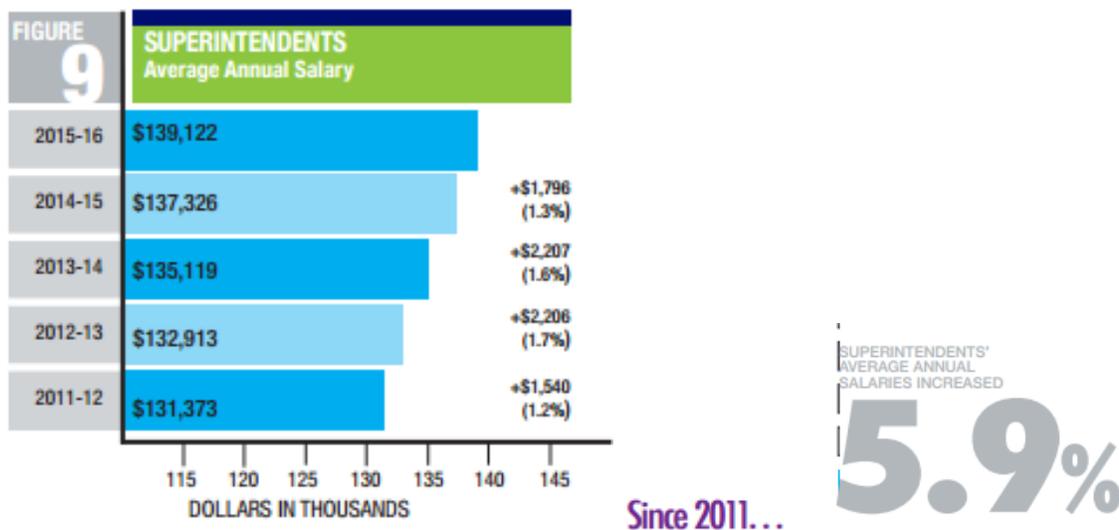
[https://ballotpedia.org/Pennsylvania_state_budget_\(2011-2012\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Pennsylvania_state_budget_(2011-2012))

Regarding the Superintendent's salary, as of May 30, 2017, it is \$11,000 under the Pennsylvania average superintendent salary. Closer to home, the median superintendent's salary in the surrounding Pittsburgh area is \$148,232, not including bonuses. The highest salary currently tops out at \$178,857. Additionally, PSBA recorded the 15-16 annual average salary for a superintendent at \$139,122 with an average annual increase of 5.9%. The Freedom Area School District provided an annual increase of 3.31% in Dr. Fuller's current contract, which is the same average annual increase that our professional staff receives in the current negotiated agreement.

<http://www1.salary.com/PA/School-Superintendent-salary.html>

<http://www1.salary.com/PA/Pittsburgh/School-Superintendent-salary.html>

https://www.psba.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/May_June_byTheNumbers.pdf



I will remark on the unpaid hours for aides based upon on a presumption on my part. The teacher's aides are not paid for the 20 hours they are required to do every year to maintain *their* state certification. However, to aid them in this endeavor, we do allow them to participate in the district's professional development classes at no charge. Our nurse is a salaried position, not hourly. Overtime is not applicable in this situation. However, when emergency situations require an extensive amount of time to be spent outside of the normal school day, compensatory time is granted.

We do employ private consultants. We have used tech companies, outsourced student occupational and speech therapy and operational services, and other services. We do this because it is a less expensive alternative to employing a full-time employee to perform these duties.

To conclude, there are many opinions, studies and viewpoints; you have the right to disagree with the administration's recommendation or the future decisions of this board. However, I hope that you now have insight that no decision is taken lightly and without serious consideration. No matter the perception people may have, this board and administrative team does make the best decisions we can for our students and the district.

Jennifer W. Sayre

Board President