

29 August 2011

John Brodrick  
Saint Paul Board of Education/EMID  
360 Colborne Street  
Saint Paul, MN 55102

Dear Mr. Brodrick,

I am writing to you because I have just learned that the EMID school board is considering shutting down the two EMID schools, Harambee and Crosswinds.

I live in St. Paul, and although my eldest son began in a St. Paul school when we first moved to town in 2000, we moved him as quickly as we could into an EMID school. He moved on from Crosswinds in 2007, completing 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade at a local charter high school. Our youngest son has gone all the way through Harambee from kindergarten on, and is now entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade at Crosswinds.

I was nearly speechless with anger when I learned that you and our school board are considering closing the schools. How can you do so without even making it possible for parents to communicate about the benefits and innovation that they embody? I intend to come to the next board meeting, but in the interim want you to hear why these schools matter so much.

I imagine that you are somehow under the impression that ending these schools would return much needed dollars to the feeder districts. I think this is an incredibly “penny-wise, pound-foolish” assumption.

At a time in which multiple criteria suggest that Minnesota is becoming more diverse, and we are facing more difficult challenges than ever as we seek to integrate many different children and families from multiple settings and contexts into shared schools, why would you close down two of the brightest spots on the scene of attempts to engage that diversity in positive and effective ways?

Scholars note (and I will attach as citations to the bottom of this letter, several articles) that educating children for success in a country as diverse and globally connected as ours is, demands equipping them with skills and practice in collaborating across multiple cultural contexts. Integration of schools –integration of our society – requires many skills that are not easily tested on multiple choice tests. I have heard certain members of the EMID board state that these schools are failing, because they have not more quickly and decisively closed the “achievement gap.” I put that phrase in quotation marks, because I

believe that you are defining that gap in very narrow terms, and assessing it only using the marker of certain narrow, content-based multiple choice tests.

As the articles I cite below note, there is clear evidence that such assessment misses the mark almost entirely. One reason why my husband and I put our children on long bus rides to these two schools, when there are public schools all around us in our neighborhood, is because we know that our children need to grow up a school environment that cherishes diversity and supports deep cultural engagement, while at the same time holding high academic standards.

Do you have any idea how unique and stellar are the achievements of these schools? I cannot believe that you do, if you are seriously considering shutting them down. These schools are small incubators of best practices in education. They have created a space in which these practices can be brought into MN, experimented with, honed, and then shared with the EMID member districts. In some ways the “cost” of the schools – if you are measuring that cost in terms of dollars not otherwise available to your district – is really very small, and is an investment, not a loss.

Integration is far more than de-segregation. Integration demands and requires learning how to communicate with cultural competence, it demands and requires awareness of structural and systemic inequalities and clear efforts to erase such inequalities. Integration is very hard work in the world we live in, and I have found no other schools in the East metro public system that are doing this work as well.

A very recent article in a leading education journal (*Teachers College Record*, out of Columbia University) identifies four key factors for meeting the needs of ALL children in schools: evidence-based instruction, long-term collaboration and engagement with teachers, community engagement, and response to the non-academic needs of students.

The EMID schools have been working hard on all four of these areas. Long before other area schools were pursuing evidence-based instruction, these two schools had trained and were supporting their teachers in implementing such work via the Profile of Learning process. That work continued even once the Profile of Learning had been abolished and new standards were being imposed. Further, Crosswinds certification as an IB program goes beyond the basic standards that the state has identified towards commitment to an internationally recognized body of standards.

On the second criteria, the turnover rate of teachers at both Harambee and Crosswinds is substantially lower than that of most schools in the east metro district. That fact alone demonstrates “long term collaboration and engagement with teachers,” but there is other evidence as well, such as the significant degree of teacher involvement in the PIE group at Harambee, the large number of teachers at Crosswinds who regularly take on additional informal tasks during inter-sessions and other periods in the school year. Indeed, the highly unusual year-round calendar of the EMID schools is yet another marker of innovation – and it is a pattern that districts around the country are beginning to find compelling, but struggling to implement. EMID has already done so.

The third factor identified – that of community engagement – is in some ways harder to document, but nonetheless is very present in these schools. All of us parents have made the decision to send our children to schools that for many of us are a long drive away from home. Even given that distance challenge, a greater obstacle to parent involvement than most schools carry, both Harambee and Crosswinds have consistently had very high levels of parent participation in parent-teacher meetings, in support for schools events (witness the recent crowds at the band, orchestra and drama presentations at Crosswinds), and in fundraising efforts.

The fourth factor – support for non-academic needs – is perhaps the most vibrant and compelling piece of the EMID success story. Many elements of these schools that outsiders might not first identify as crucial to integration – the year round calendar, the commitment to music and the arts, the IB certification – are all elements integral to creating and supporting a school culture that takes seriously all of the personal and social elements of learning. These are key pieces to why integration is working in EMID schools. Yet even so, these are only academic markers of an underlying commitment to drawing ALL students into learning that works for them, and supporting them amidst a culture of care that has very high expectations for all students.

Both Harambee and Crosswinds have very low “pull-out” rates, compared to other schools in the district. This means that rather than providing services to children whose needs are not being met in the classroom, and who therefore have to be “pulled out” for special education or for behavioral issues, our classrooms are working so well that there is much less need for such intervention. This is a direct consequence of the climate of these schools being focused on real integration and support for students’ non-academic needs.

Systemic racism is a problem throughout Minnesota, indeed throughout our country. It has an impact on every element of a student’s learning experience. At EMID schools, however, that destructive element of our shared context is directly engaged, and students, teachers and parents are invited to collaborate together in ways that are slowly beginning to ease the worst of racism’s effects. You can not possibly expect two small schools to overturn a century of oppression, but it is reasonable to expect open discussion, clear collaboration, and shared effort to engage racism directly – and these things are part of the very fabric of EMID schools.

Every high school in our country has to deal on some level with student identity groups, a natural part of student developmental growth, but Crosswinds students, teachers and parents consistently testify to the softer edges of the cliques present there. Kids regularly mix across lines of identification. Kids who are “geeks” hang out with “theater nerds.” Kids who are moving from shelter to shelter hang out with kids whose parents have six figure incomes. Kids who are multi-racial and kids who are monocultural share and learn together. The kids themselves point with pride to their shared school identity being “weird” compared to the other, much more obviously identity-divided high schools they

encounter on field trips. There is a community and level of inclusion present in EMID schools that I have never experienced in other schools.

Speaking very personally for a moment, as the parent of a child who lives with cerebral palsy and an autism spectrum challenge, I can tell you that I have not found any better place for my child to learn and grow – and believe me, I have looked very hard. Indeed, one reason that the academic achievement statistics at EMID schools are not higher is precisely because of the high number of children with special needs who attend these schools. Yet these kids are doing much better in EMID than in the districts they came from. I could give you story after story of specific student growth. My son is now a sophomore at St. John's University in Collegeville. He is succeeding there in large part due to the fine preparation and education he received at Crosswinds.

My other son, our youngest, is at the opposite end of the education spectrum, easily qualifying to enter the lottery for Capitol Hill in St. Paul, for instance. He is eligible for talented and gifted support, but we have deliberately and intentionally kept him in EMID schools because we recognize that he is learning far more of the cultural competence and other skills he'll need to thrive in adulthood in these schools, than he would in St. Paul's public schools.

Why on earth would you, as the school board charged with tending these schools, want to shut them down? They are a vital resource for the other schools in the member districts, because they give you a place in which these various innovations can be tried out, and student, parent and teacher responses can be engaged. You should instead be telling their stories more widely, and taking credit for one of the few bright spots in the otherwise dim reputation of the east metro!

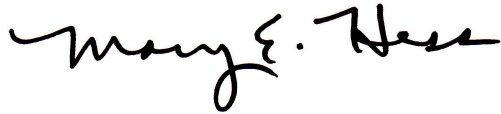
At a time when more and more high income families are abandoning the public districts altogether, or sending their children to charter schools, why would you want to close down schools that are actively attractive to such families, and also actively attractive and effective for families who come from backgrounds of poverty?

I think you are vastly overestimating the funds that would return to individual districts were you to close these schools. How can you imagine that kids whose families have chosen to send them so far away to school, would simply plop them down in inferior schools in their home districts? At best you might have some that would return to charter schools in your area. Further, whatever funds you might immediately realize from the sale of the buildings – buildings which are striking in their beauty and effective design – would be a one-time gain. Whereas the benefits each member district can – and many do – receive from active collaboration and cross-fertilization from the innovation these schools pilot, is a long-term return on investment.

I believe that you and the rest of the board must reconsider your options for EMID. These schools need to remain open, and they need – and deserve – your full-throated support and advocacy.

I will be at the next board meeting, and will do my best to hold you personally accountable for the decisions made there.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary E. Hess". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "M".

Dr. Mary E. Hess  
1993 Lincoln Avenue  
St. Paul, MN 55105

CC: Bryan Bass, Crosswinds  
Kathy Griebel, Harambee

Citations:

Tyrone C. Howard, *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2009.

Jerusha Osberg Conner, "From International Schools to Inner-City Schools: The First Principles of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program," *Teachers College Record*, Volume 110 Number 2, 2008, p. 322-351. (<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 14538, Date Accessed: 8/28/2011)

Ernest Morell and Pedro Noguera, "A framework for change: A broader and bolder approach to school reform," *Teachers College Record*, August 4, 2011 (<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 16503, Date Accessed: 8/28/2011).

Lorri J. Santamaria, "Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instruction: Narrowing Gaps Between Best Pedagogical Practices Benefiting All Learners," *Teachers College Record*, Volume 111 Number 1, 2009, p. 214-247 (<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 15210, Date Accessed: 8/28/2011)