

## Savedoff's Letter to LMSD community

*Note: Many members of the community have expressed their displeasure with the content and tone of Superintendent Savedoff's letter to the community that was posted on the District's website and run in the local papers on September 21, 2006. The response below was compiled on behalf of these members of the community who are concerned with the direction of the current Administration and Board. Visit [www.lmsd.info](http://www.lmsd.info) to learn more. To maintain factual integrity, Superintendent Savedoff's original words are in black; the responses are in blue (italics).*

Dear LMSD Community,

I'm happy to report that the school year is off to a successful start. Students and staff have returned, filling the hallways and classrooms with the energy, excitement and spirit that give meaning to our mission as a District and purpose to our roles as educators. It is a unique time, marked by opportunity, promise and inspiration. It is also a time of reflection; a time to consider where we stand as a District and what we stand for when it comes to public education in Lower Merion. *You may expect that we will now hear the superintendent's thoughts on the "opportunity, promise and inspiration" that he just mentioned and his reflection on "what we stand for when it comes to public education in Lower Merion."*

Leadership in education has helped set us apart from other communities in the Commonwealth and the country. It would be difficult to find a community anywhere in the United States that boasts the same concentration and caliber of public and independent schools, world-class colleges and research universities. Our kids are smart, savvy and motivated and well-prepared for the road ahead. From academics, athletics and the arts, to social and spiritual experiences, we willingly provide opportunities that help shape a "whole" child. And these opportunities include the right kinds of educational facilities. *And that's his segue to the real point of this letter, which is not to talk about his education vision and goals, but instead to talk about his construction vision and goals. Apparently, in the pursuit of those goals the rest of the Superintendent's long letter is dedicated to slandering any citizens that question what he is doing. But first, his justification for our new \$100M high schools.*

Our neighbor and one of the nation's premier independent schools, Episcopal Academy, recently purchased 123 acres of rolling farmland in Newtown Township for a new, unified campus at the cost of \$20M. *According to the Episcopal Academy website, this \$20M was donated by a small group of dedicated visionaries. No debt was incurred.* While EA has long been able to provide an outstanding education at its Merion location, the constraints of the property, new program demands, enrollment growth and the lack of available land in Lower Merion spurred the need for a move. The new campus, which will feature nearly 375,000 square feet of new program space for 1100 students at a cost of approximately \$125M, is a point of pride and ideal school for the EA community. *According to the Episcopal Academy website, they are building a new 370,000 square foot campus for their three schools (Lower, Middle, and Upper) covering grades Pre K-12. The concept is described as "A school village consisting of main buildings and smaller buildings organized around a central green, with the Chapel as the focal point of the site." They are building seven new structures and renovating three historic buildings. Their site plans also show a football stadium, three baseball fields, four soccer fields, and fourteen tennis courts. The campus is complete with all of the essentials such as theater, athletic center and pool. The Chapel was designed by world-renowned architect Robert Venturi. The Chapel is a significant feature of the new Episcopal Academy campus and we agree with Mr. Savedoff's inclusion of the Chapel as "program space" as Upper and Middle school students attend Chapel three days per week; Lower school student attend one day per week.* It will no doubt provide room for students to breathe, grow and excel for generations. (As a point of comparison, our new schools will house 1250 students on sites of 35-50 acres at the cost of around \$100M each for a 330,000 sq. foot facility.) *We have no idea why a public school superintendent would compare our new high schools with Episcopal Academy as opposed to other public school construction in PA. Is he suggesting that we should be providing a "private" education for public school students at the expense of all taxpayers? Is this what he understands his role as a public school superintendent to be? Perhaps, but it does seem that Episcopal*

**Academy is getting a lot more for its \$100M than we are (the New Harriton doesn't even have a pool!) This is because, while they are essentially building a small school district, they have not grossly oversized common and administrative spaces, as LMSD has.**

Would that we could do what our friends at Episcopal can do! **We are sure those who are raising the funds for Episcopal Academy wish that they could do what Mr. Savedoff can do. Episcopal Academy must rely on the generosity of thousands of alumni, parents and friends who share the vision for Episcopal Academy's future, so they can build their new campus with little or no debt. By contrast, Mr. Savedoff and the Board can borrow the money, saddling the community with massive debt service and then raise the real estate taxes of every residential and commercial property owner in the Township, many of whom do not support such an extravagant New Harriton. Based on the input of the citizens who spoke at the Act 34 hearing (9 for New Harriton as proposed and 27 against), it is pretty safe to say that New Harriton would not be built were it not for the Board's unilateral ability to borrow nearly a quarter of a billion dollars and then raise taxes to cover the debt. But, you can't see what happened at the hearing because the school board refuses to air the video tape it made of the meeting. While the District continues to talk about a non-profit foundation that will raise money from alumni and parents, such benefactors are not being counted on as a source of funds for the construction of New Harriton. That burden falls on local taxpayers (99.05%) and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (0.95%).** Our reality, however, is such that we can't simply pick up and move. We must work within the constraints of our sites. Instead of building from scratch on farmland, we must construct two, new buildings within comparatively small residential tracts. We must move our buses off-site to begin construction. **As was pointed out at the Act 34 hearing, it is ironic that a District that owns at least 195 acres of real estate (and has sold other land in the recent past) must now acquire even more land to house its buses. And, they want us to continue to blindly trust their judgment.** We must move forward in a way that is sensitive to our surrounding neighbors. Any way you slice it, it's a tight fit and highly complex process. And while this process comes with certain, unavoidable and significant costs, these are the costs of constructing quality schools that will serve our community for generations. We could build on the cheap, but like the folks from EA, we believe that our kids deserve better. **Our children deserve a plan that will spend the right amount of money on the right things that have been proven to promote a better education. The District has not been able to prove that building an extravagant new high school (or two) will directly lead to improvement in the quality of education being provided. Furthermore, proceeding with a New Harriton that is too big and too expensive could result in some unfortunate consequences for the District. First, the tax increases being proposed are forcing long term residents of the District to sell their homes because they can no longer afford the taxes. Second, with the signing of Act 1, citizens will now vote on school budgets that exceed the CPI inflation index. After witnessing the spending habits of this board, voters will surely cast a more critical eye on the proposed construction of a New Lower Merion High School when they realize that the New Harriton was too extravagant. The uncontrolled decisions of today not only jeopardize the Lower Merion high school project, they also threaten future education programs. The funds being utilized to construct a New Harriton that is too big and too expensive could be used in the future to fund educational or extra curricular programs or to deal with a shortfall in the State teachers' pension fund that the District has warned is looming.**

Of course, not everyone agrees. A new "reform" group has asked you to believe that there is something pernicious about modernizing the high schools. **To "modernize" generally means to renovate, refurbish or update. The two high schools are not being modernized. They are being totally demolished to make way for brand new schools that are too large and too expensive. As pointed out in the CAC report, there are portions of both schools that could easily have been retained and utilized as part of the new schools. However, the Board and Administration have rejected this idea. In fact, we have it in their own words that they specifically rejected partial renovation at Lower Merion High School because they believe doing so would likely trigger a referendum under Act 34. Instead, they have opted to spend tens of millions more to avoid going to the voters.** I have a lot of experience with these types of groups. **We expect he does; as superintendent of schools in Montgomery Township, NJ, Mr. Savedoff championed the controversial construction of a new high school that placed a significant tax burden on that community. In that situation, Mr. Savedoff was unable to unite that community. Tensions grew so high there that, Mr. Savedoff was quoted**

***in the Washington Post, stating: "We had a fistfight break out outside one of the meetings." In almost every district in every state where voter referendum is required for school budgets, there is a protest or "reform" website, often with the standard, vitriolic language about school district conspiracies, lies, deceit and moral depravity. The authors plaster misleading and out-of-context propaganda in community spaces. Despite broad criticisms such as this, the District has not been able to identify even one piece of information that has been false or misleading, other than to complain that information is being given "out-of-context." On the other hand, we continue to prove that much of the information the district has provided is false. They claim they have no political motives, but often have political backing. The citizens who have become involved and contributed their time and thoughts to www.lmsd.info, the Alternative Information Source, come from various and diverse political backgrounds. The only common bond is a desire to provide facts to the community that the school board has withheld so that the taxpayers can decide whether the Administration and Board are acting in the best interests of the community. They request hundreds of pages of data and when they don't get a satisfactory response to their requests they make claims of legal infractions and mismanagement of public funds. The requested data that the District has refused to provide includes an annual operating budget with the same level of detail as provided by the Lower Merion Township Board of Commissioners and many other school districts in the area. Other "unreasonable" requests have included the calculations submitted to the PA Department of Education to show that New Harriton is being designed to accommodate the appropriate number of students based on enrollment projections. We have also continually requested that the Act 34 Hearing be broadcast. Instead of proposing solutions, they develop apocalyptic scenarios and prey on community fears. Anyone who attended and was paying attention at the Act 34 hearing heard the same solution over and over again: Build a New Harriton that is the appropriate size and, thus, less expensive than the one being recommended. In the alternative, let the citizens vote on the New Harriton that is being proposed via a referendum as was intended by Act 34, the Taj Mahal Act. Their primary targets are senior citizens. We do not "target" anyone. However, seniors and others on fixed incomes will be particularly hard hit by the District's extravagance, and were therefore the first ones to show up at the budget meetings this summer and were the first ones to look for others to share their concerns. They are particularly active during important election cycles. The District controlled the timing of the unveiling of its extravagant plans and the resultant tax increase. They're usually led by a handful of individuals with minimal direct experience with local public schools. Again, this group represents a broad cross section of the community. Perhaps Superintendent Savedoff noticed that many of those who spoke out against the plans for New Harriton at the Act 34 hearing were themselves alumni/ae and/or parents of current and former students. Finally, given the fact that Superintendent Savedoff has chosen to continue to live in New Jersey, is he really entitled to characterize those of us who have lived and paid taxes in this community our entire adult lives as having "minimal direct experience with local public schools?"***

Our new group, not surprisingly, seems to be operating in this manner. Here are a few reasons why we should be wary of their propaganda:

- It is impossible to build two quality high schools in Lower Merion for \$150M and they know it. They have chosen to use this figure as it was an estimated construction cost provided to our Community Advisory Committee during deliberations. They won't tell you that the figure did not include a standard grossing factor (which represents the space for hallways, common areas, lobbies and the like), has been impacted by inflation (including double-digit increases in energy resources and construction materials), the need to relocate buses and accommodations for Township regulations and neighbors' rights. ***The Superintendent continues to twist and distort the CAC report to suit his agenda. On the one hand, he says the CAC provided a "mandate" for two new high schools. However, when the specifics of the report are questioned, he and the Administration disavow any responsibility. Shouldn't the Administration have anticipated a correct grossing factor, inflation and the need to build schools that would meet local codes and be responsive to neighbors? These seem like very basic factors that should have been known and properly quantified before they were provided to the CAC. Finally, since a standard grossing factor was not utilized in the "build new" scenario given to the CAC, the cost to build new was understated relative to the cost to renovate. Perhaps if the CAC had been given the correct numbers, they would have reached a different conclusion. And remember that the CAC stated that their recommendations did not exclude partial renovation.***

•One high school is not a feasible option and they know it. Sure, operating costs for one school would be lower; one school is a less expensive option and we've never denied that fact. It was an option explored extensively by the CAC. But read the CAC report and you'll note the primary logic for two schools: smaller schools are better for students. Read on and you'll note that such a facility could never exist under Township zoning regulations and that the local infrastructure is not sufficient to support a school of 2,500 students on a residential street in Rosemont. And try selling the one-school option to the Rosemont Civic Association! ***Superintendent Savedoff continues to divide the community by implying that those who are against the grandiose plans for New Harriton and Lower Merion high schools are pushing for one new high school. He has been putting these words in citizens' mouths for over four months. If he would carefully examine the record, Mr. Savedoff will not find one instance where one new high school has been advocated. However, it is a fact that the CAC was misled on the rationale for two schools by the Administration citing nonexistent PDE requirements about a minimum acreage standard for new schools in the Commonwealth.***

•They use selective statistics. They question our students' abilities by focusing on statistics taken from the results of a single test for a single class for a single year instead of looking at steady improvement and achievement over the course of multiple years. What they won't tell you is that we've made huge gains at the elementary level in reading and mathematics, that our kids continue to score at the highest levels on every standardized test, that we have more National Merit Semifinalists this year than any other public school district in Pennsylvania and that we develop wonderful, well-rounded kids who haven't been "taught to the test." ***We know that the Superintendent was at the September 11, 2006 Education meeting when Assistant Superintendent Tobin informed us that our high school student math scores are trending down, not up; that our 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored higher on the PSSA math test when they were in 8<sup>th</sup> grade than they scored last year in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and that our achievement gap between white and black students is increasing and was higher last year than its ever been. While we have never "questioned" our students ability, we have questioned why we get no more performance for the massive amounts that we spend over our neighbors who, in fact, score higher on the PSSA and SAT; we have questioned why the Administration publishes that we have the highest SAT scores in the state when we don't (we don't want to quibble but lets not lie); we have questioned why the superintendent never addresses the few negative trends that we are experiencing; and we have questioned why our educational priorities seem skewed. At the September 11, 2006 Education meeting we learned that we have only one math specialist to help our underachieving high schools students. Does this make sense in light of the fact that we have eight vice principals in those same two schools? Has the superintendent considered having only one vice principal per grade (a cost savings sufficient to hire many math teachers) or even shaving a few dollars from the \$5M sports budget to cover just one more math specialist?***

•They tell you the District is denying the public a right to vote on the projects. ***Nearly all of the 27 speakers at the Act 34 hearing demanded a referendum on New Harriton. To date, the District has not agreed to this demand. In fact, the District continues to design the schools to be more expensive than required specifically to avoid a referendum, a "loophole" in the way the Act was written and is enforced.*** What they won't tell you is that in the last School Board elections, the public elected a Board that ran on a "new schools" ticket. This slate of candidates won by a large majority; the vote represented a clear mandate. ***In the last School Board election, the two political parties agreed to run a total of four candidates for four seats. Thus, all of the candidates cross filed under both parties and ran unopposed. There was no choice for the voters, and consequently no mandate. In fact, the ability to send a message to the board regarding its actions was purposefully taken away from the voters. It's hard to imagine that Mr. Savedoff would characterize this political "deal" as a mandate. We're being kind here. Check it out yourself. His description of the last elections is simply not true!*** The high school modernization project is a product of representative, democratic government, which seems to have worked in this country for more than 200 years. The planning process has included more than 100 public meetings and opportunities for public comment. ***While we have no idea how many meetings there actually have been (each time he quotes a number, its different; at the Act 34 hearing we were told it was about 60; in the September 28, 2006 Main Line Times, Mr. Savedoff was quoted as saying there have been 40) public input has been***

*discouraged by, among other things: (1) failure to advertise meetings in ways that might reach non-public school parents; (2) failure to publish meeting agendas to distinguish between typical board meetings and meetings to present the construction program; (3) failure to make public important documents regarding the District and the planned New Harriton; (4) use of a taxpayer funded website to promote the Administration's agenda by encouraging citizens to lobby elected officials against referenda; (5) failure to seriously consider and publicly debate citizens' input given at meetings; (6) not allowing residents at the Act 34 hearing to use the podium that was made available to the Administration and its paid consultants to deliver their remarks; and (7) not airing the Act 34 Hearing on the local cable television channel.* And thanks to a new law, voters will in fact have an opportunity to vote directly on the new Lower Merion High School project next school year. *You have to question his motives on this one. If the Administration is truly thankful for the advent of referenda, why do they steadfastly refuse to allow a referendum on their plans for New Harriton? Even worse, why would anyone be happy about a law that requires the public to approve capital projects through a yes/no vote on the operating budget? To avoid placing education programs in jeopardy, votes on capital projects should be decoupled from operating budget votes. The only way to do this is via a referendum. So, unless the superintendent has changed his mind on a referendum vote for the New Harriton, he's simply not telling us the truth here either.*

Clearly, the purpose of their diatribe is not to support two, new schools. If that was their intent, they'd present solutions. *Once again, here are the solutions: (1) design a New Harriton for a number of students that is supported by enrollment projections (1,250 students) as required by law; (2) allocate a reasonable amount of space per student (not 262 square feet (SF) per student when other local districts are currently building for 178 SF per student and the national median for new high schools is 163 SF per student); (3) utilize a grossing factor of 1.58 as required by PDE regulations, instead of the 1.73 that is being used. The result will be an appropriately sized and less expensive New Harriton. Alternatively, allow the voters to approve the New Harriton as currently proposed via referendum as was intended by Act 34, the Taj Mahal Act.* They would have been part of this process from the beginning. They would not have simply jumped in the fray at a politically and strategically convenient time. *Proposed tax increases of 14.3% (and a 58.7% increase in project costs) have a funny way of getting people mobilized, especially when the District has not proven that the additional spending will result in even one student receiving a better education. These are the things that have motivated concerned citizens. Had these things been publicized by the district early in the process, instead of at the last possible moment required by law, this debate would be behind us.*

Your public schools have served this community well for more than 150 years. We are a longstanding, community-based institution with a history of achievements and a national reputation for excellence. We ask for your support and consideration at this critical time. *Mr. Savedoff is absolutely correct. Do not allow this Administration and this Board to ruin our outstanding school system by diverting the community's resources to build two monuments to this board in the form of two new high schools which are both too large and too expensive when compared to the needs of our community.*

I encourage the public to learn the facts about the projects on the District website, [www.lmsd.org](http://www.lmsd.org). *Please compare the District's information to the materials contained on [www.lmsd.info](http://www.lmsd.info), The Alternative Information Source. Educate yourself and make an informed decision! In addition, please join the growing group of citizens from all walks of life who are calling for a School District that is fiscally responsible, fiscally transparent and education driven.*

Thank you for your continued support of our schools.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jamie P. Savedoff

*Comments in blue (italics) were compiled by Stephen Gleason and Bill Manginelli*