

Corbett Charter School
35800 E Historic Columbia River Hwy
Corbett, OR 97019



April 7, 2013

Dear Friends,

I hope this finds you well. I am writing in response to a letter and an email that I received within a couple of days of each other. They both raise the question of the stability of Corbett Charter School and one asks whether parents and students should look at Corbett's Open Enrollment program and change schools now rather than to risk losing out if Corbett Charter School doesn't survive.

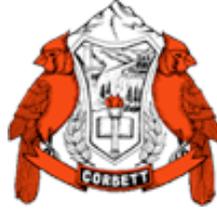
First, the short version of my advice to parents: sit still. Those who want to be rid of Corbett Charter School aren't interested in losing any of you. Should they be successful, you will be given first priority for entry into Corbett School District at that time. Without the dollars that your students represent, they have no motivation to be rid of the Charter School. Their strategy is a money grab, and your cooperation is essential to them.

If, on the other hand, you transfer to the Corbett School this year and the Charter School continues, you lack two guarantees. First, we don't have a mechanism to allow you to return to the Charter School unless there is space available, and our wait lists are significant. There have already been bills proposed in the Oregon legislature to overturn Open Enrollment, which would preclude future siblings joining Corbett School. Even if not overturned, the Open Enrollment has a sunset and may well not be renewed three years from now. The charter law, on the other hand, isn't going anywhere.

More onerous for those hoping for a great education in Corbett is that if the charter detractors win, there is no guarantee that Corbett Schools, two years later, would be a place that you want to send your children. The same District Board members who support evicting the Charter School and grabbing the money have taken positions against the following programs: Imaginative Education, Multiage Classrooms, Saxon Math, and the Advanced Placement program. They have also staked out positions against Dr. Trani and virtually every recommendation that he has made since their election. In short, they want to undo everything that has been put in place since I joined the District 14 years ago. They are openly spiteful of the current Corbett administration, and it would be tragically naïve to imagine that the current Corbett administrators would retain their positions if the charter detractors win out.

There is a school board election coming up, and there are clearly two 'tickets', one that supports the current superintendent and is much friendlier to Corbett Charter, and one that is spiteful of both. If the two detractors who aren't running this year are joined by two others who share their vision for Corbett then I believe that Corbett Charter

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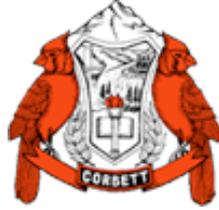
School may well outlast the current administration. Administrators serve at the pleasure of the District Board. Charter School personnel are not on the District payroll and are not subject to the whims of the board. For a parent to switch schools at this time may be the worst thing that you could do for the current Corbett administration and for Corbett Charter School.

Corbett School District has been insistent throughout the life of Corbett Charter School that there are no real differences between the two and that it doesn't matter whether a student attends one or the other. But each year brings another accumulation of evidence to the contrary. The two schools do *not* have identical achievement. Corbett Charter School has outperformed the Corbett School on every official measure of student achievement. There are those who will argue that achievement has nothing to do with the quality of the schools and that it's all a matter of demographics. I will only point out that the differences in achievement are greatest at the grade levels where the Charter has the greatest degree of freedom. This is too easily researchable for me to dwell on here.

Achievement aside, the fiscal differences between the two schools might be the most urgent practical matter upon which we can all agree. Corbett Charter, after paying rent, educates its students for an average of less than \$4900.00 per pupil per year. Corbett School District spends (in 2012) just over \$8000.00 per pupil. What happens to the budget if 480 charter students become Corbett School District students? Can Corbett education 480 students on 2.35 million dollars? Last year 480 students cost them more on the order of 3.8 million, and the only reason that this level of funding was available was that the charter school paid over a half million in rent! It's simple math, but nobody who is keen on getting rid of the charter school is offering up much of an answer to the question of whether Corbett can maintain its current programs and class sizes without Corbett Charter. The District was having serious conversations, for example, about severely curtailing the music program until Corbett Charter offered an extra \$60,000 a year in exchange for a promise to hold on the music for that period. Do we really want to see the kind of cuts that would already have occurred had Corbett Charter not been a presence in the district?

Corbett Charter School has demonstrated fiscal discipline that is largely unmatched in the state. I do not know of a single program that educates students from K-12 on fewer dollars. (And we offer full-day kindergarten without any tuition!) Who can fail to see that its elimination is a recipe for reduced levels of service to Corbett's current students? I submitted a report to Corbett demonstrating that the presence of Corbett Charter School increased the available per pupil funding for Corbett students by 20%. The detractors seem not to have read it. The simple math of the situation only highlights that even where fiscal concerns are the purported rationale for their actions, no effort has gone into understanding the fiscal realities.

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One final irony is known only to those who understand the state funding formula as it pertains to small schools and charter schools. Every child who enrolls in Corbett Charter School increases the per pupil dollars available to those students who actually reside in Corbett and attend the Corbett School. Every child who transfers into Corbett School through open enrollment *reduces* the per pupil funds available to Corbett resident students. Simple fact. Dr. Trani has reassured me several times this year that he reads the fiscal impact the same way that I have described.

Finally, I received a letter on Corbett School District letterhead but it had no signature block. Odd. It was a ‘courtesy’ warning that Corbett School District would be reviewing the question of whether it was financial advantageous to evict Corbett Charter School even if the charter is renewed. (They know how embarrassing and illegal it would be to non-renew one of the top performing schools in the nation, so they seek another angle!) I don’t know how much more clearly it can be stated. Whoever wrote the letter clearly believes that the quality of education, the choice of parents, the performance of Corbett Charter School: none of these considerations can be allowed to get in the way of maximizing the District’s accumulation of wealth. Their position conveniently ignores that four years ago they were congratulating and thanking Corbett Charter School for saving Corbett School District financially and for preserving employment for a dozen of its teachers. And one could forgive their greed (not I, but ‘one’) if not for the fact that they simply have got it wrong. If they win, they will do severe and perhaps irreparable fiscal damage, to the District that they have sworn to shepherd. They will also damage, beyond repair, their oath to serve the students of Corbett School District. *All* of the students of Corbett School District. And right now that includes the students of Corbett Charter School. We are part of Corbett School District. YOU are part of Corbett School District, and the Board is sworn to serve your children.

Every Charter student who transfers to the Corbett School at this time becomes a statistic that our detractors will use to ‘prove’ their perspective. The rumors of insecurity become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you wish to support them, then that is up to you. I didn’t want you to find yourselves having supported them unwittingly.

I know that this kind of transparency is bad manners...especially for those of us who live in the gravitational pull of Portlandia. But there it is. And if such transparency runs contrary to the rules of polite society, then I would argue that the stakes are too high to let one side cheat outright while the other plays according to Hoyle. Bullies always rely on bystanders being too polite or too timid to get involved.

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I am utterly committed to bring to bear what persuasion, politics or legal action is required to see that your children, my students, and Corbett Charter School are treated fairly. Fairness can result in only one thing: the timely renewal of the entire charter agreement, which includes the use of the facilities that we currently occupy. It's best for your students, and it is in the best interests of all of the students of Corbett School District, many of whom I have known and served since the day they entered school here.

I am, of course, sick from all of this. In my bleaker moments I ponder whether their drive to destroy isn't just rage against anything good, anything hopeful, anything bright. I'm not sure. But I believe that they shouldn't be allowed to win out. And I believe that they can only win with your cooperation. Choose freely. That's one of our core values. Perhaps the only higher value is to choose wisely. And, if ethics matter, choose fairly.

Respectfully,

Robert R. Dunton, Director