

## The Long View from Casco Bay High School

by Derek Pierce

I recently sat on the glorious summit of Pleasant Mountain with fifty Casco Bay High juniors, listening to the students describe the impact they wanted to have as a class - and as a generation. Each student spoke. Many talked of the powerful community we have forged. Others highlighted the confidence and commitment they've gained to confront the world's pressing problems.

Students also expressed a yearning for CBHS to be understood. "We want to show people what a great school this is," several said. As Maine's newest public high school, we recognize that many still do not know who we are.

So who are we? We are a great option for ANY Portland teen who wants a small high school with big opportunities for student voice and choice. We are designed to fulfill the district and state's goal to graduate every student ready for college, career and citizenship. Our student body reflects Portland's wonderful diversity, and we are committed to enabling our students to become the best versions of themselves through our version of the 3R's: Rigor, Relevance and Relationships.

How are we doing? Very well. On a survey last November, 96% of parents said that their "child is encouraged to learn and achieve at his/her highest potential." In our first round of standardized testing, we exceeded the state average. More importantly, our students are developing essential literacies through "learning expeditions" that address real issues for real purposes. Last spring, our freshmen hosted a conference on global sustainability at USM, and our sophomores showed "the human face of human rights" through an exhibit of multi-media oral histories at SALT Gallery. So far this year, the sophomores have created a foundation to fight infectious disease in the developing world, and over 40% of our juniors are taking a college course.

Since Portland already has two venerable high schools, why are we necessary? To help more students become the adults they dream to be and the citizens we need them to be. Reports on the Maine economy call for a workforce that is more creative and entrepreneurial, that has vital competencies in math, communication and technology and that can solve problems effectively as a team. These are precisely the skill sets our students are developing, every day. According to Duke Albanese, Executive Director of the Great Schools Partnership, Casco Bay is "a maturing, innovative exemplar of what high school needs to be in *these* times for *today's* students." For a cross-section of students - whether high achieving, struggling or somewhere in the middle - a smaller, expeditionary learning environment is better. Moreover, Portland needs to capitalize on its unique educational assets: choice and diversity. We are another reason for families to stay in - or move to - Portland.

But aren't we too costly? No. We must provide a fantastic education to our students for essentially the same per pupil costs as Deering and Portland. Last year, we were less expensive. As a new and growing school, our enrollment is in flux, but we already have a

plan for 08-09 to ensure that our per pupil costs be consistent with Deering's and Portland's.

The view from the summit remains compelling. Our promise is mirrored in small progressive start-up high schools nationwide. Dorchester's Codman Academy, another Expeditionary Learning school, has had 100% of its first graduating classes accepted to college. As Portlanders learn of our students' achievements, we will have more interest than openings. And as our exceptional faculty has more opportunity to create and collaborate, we know our great school will only get better.

Great cities, like great schools, welcome change - and grow. At our opening school meeting, sophomore Emily Kelsey spoke of her own evolution; "Casco Bay has changed my life," she reflected, "Casco Bay feeds one's soul."

May generations of Portlanders have the opportunity to speak about school this way.