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A local program of school choice is here to stay

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Monadnock Community Connections future resolved

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SWANZEY CENTER — Since its inception, the Monadnock Community Connections program has been plagued by questions about its future.

Now, the Monadnock Regional School District — and the students who attend its alternative high school program — finally have an answer.

Students in Monadnock Community Connections from other districts will be allowed to stay in the program, but new enrollments will be limited to those living in the Monadnock Regional School District.

Beginning in the 2010-11 school year, Monadnock Community Connections will move to Monadnock Regional High School from the Wilcox School building across the street.

Principal Brian S. Pickering said, "Our goal will be to have it at the same cost per student as every other student in this building."

Pickering said the program will have one full-time teacher and will share support staff and other resources with the high school.

"We now have an idea that MC2 is going to stay," Pickering said after the school board approved the administration's plan for the program. "This is how it's going to look."

Monadnock Community Connections — known colloquially as "MC2" or "MC-squared" — started in 2002 with the support of a federal grant.

The grant, which has since run out, promoted so-called school "choice" programs. Academics at Monadnock Community Connections are personally tailored, incorporate internships and require students to demonstrate in a variety of ways their grasp of what they've learned.

Although awarded to the Monadnock district, the grant benefited students and educators in N.H. School Administrative Unit 38, which includes Monadnock, Hinsdale and Winchester, and Unit 29, which is comprised of Keene and several area towns.

The money helped create a program that's won educational accolades but has drawn criticism in the Monadnock district for its per-pupil cost and for being open to students from other districts.

This year, about \$396,000 was budgeted for the program, according to Unit 38 Business Manager Earl H. Wammack, who said the actual cost would probably be less. Pickering recently said 13 students attend Monadnock Community Connections and estimated four of them were from other districts.

Among them is John T. LaFord, 17, of Winchester.

"Every student should have the wonderful opportunity that MC-squared provides. It is a program like no other," he said, describing how it should be open to students from beyond the Monadnock district's borders.

Gilsum resident Joanne P. Peniuk also raved about the program, which her son attends.

"This is an unheralded gem that has not gotten its right due," she said. "This program has huge potential. It's nationally recognized as being an incredible opportunity for young people to learn."

However, Gilsum school board member Edward W. Jacod — who ultimately voted in favor of the administration's plan — said one aspect of the program concerned him.

"What we're saying is we're going to eliminate the drop-out problem because we're going to create a little different set of rules for the people who really can't handle living by the rules," he said.

While complimenting the program's academics, he said the program "provides a means for those who can't adjust to get by without adjusting. That's my problem."

To that, Pickering answered, "Education has changed from 20 years ago, 30 years ago and even from yesterday. ... I'm offering you to keep what's unique about this for the same cost as everybody else. ... You've hired your administrative team to make those instructional decisions. If we don't come through, fire us. But please don't tell us what the best instructional practices are each week, because we're studying that."

After the school board's vote, 16-year-old Monadnock Community Connections student Raven Victoria Gill said she thinks moving the program back to the high school will help people see what Monadnock Community Connections offers and reduce the criticism that surrounds it.

The program's "given me a voice. My confidence has gone through the roof," said Gill, of Fitzwilliam, who attended the meeting with several other Monadnock Community Connections students.

Gill said she'll take this newfound strength with her when the program moves back to the high school, where she said she had previously been harassed.

Still, she questioned where exactly the program will be housed.

Pickering called this "the next fair question" in the midst of ongoing problems with overcrowding at the middle/high school. He said administrators now have a year and a half to examine the best use of space in the building.

In the meantime, Superintendent Kenneth R. Dassau said removing the politics from Monadnock Community Connections will give it stability that will help it succeed.

Pickering offered similar thoughts.

"(MC2) will get stronger. They have survived change after change after change and more importantly they have survived criticism after criticism, week after week, month after month, and they're still standing," he said. "It's time now to let this group move forward."

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