

**Pennsylvania House Education Committee
Advanced Placement Hearing
September 29, 2010**

**Testimony of Dr. Thomas Butler, Superintendent of Schools
Ridgway Area School District, Ridgway, Pennsylvania**

Good morning Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Clymer, and honorable members of the committee. I am honored to come before you today to share some thoughts on how rural school districts can use Advanced Placement classes to build capacity for students and the school system. The importance of rural school districts in Pennsylvania is obvious. In the Commonwealth, 243 of the 501 school districts are considered rural (according to the definition of rural provided by The Center for Rural Pennsylvania), and rural schools in Pennsylvania educate 503,900 students. These rural students, and the schools in which they attend, benefit from offering Advanced Placement courses.

Ridgway Area School District

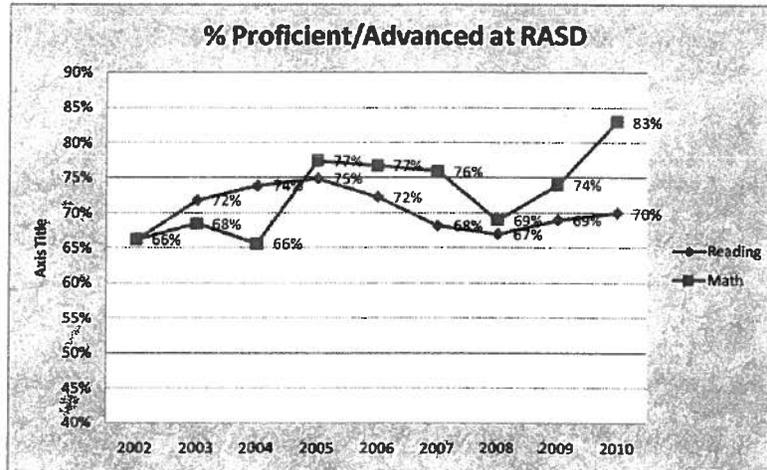
Ridgway Area School District is located in northwest Pennsylvania at the midway point between Pittsburgh and Buffalo. The district encompasses 181 square miles with half of that area within the Allegheny National Forest and other State Game Land. Ridgway enrolls 1004 children in grades K-12. The district is located in Elk County, comprises all or parts of three townships: Ridgway, Horton, Spring Creek and the Borough of Ridgway. The resident population is 7,225 with the borough of Ridgway comprising a population of 4,096.

Forty five percent of the children qualify for a free/reduced lunch; an increase of 10% since 2008. Fourteen percent of the children qualify for special education services. We have adopted a K-8 school wide Title I program.

The school district employs 150 people (both full and part time) with 87 of the employees being teachers. The school district's administrative staff consists of the superintendent, finance manager, director of student services, and three building principals.

Ridgway Area School District Achievement Gains

The Ridgway Area school District has experienced a steady increase in PSSA achievement over the past four years. The following chart graphically represents these achievement gains.



I believe there are two factors that have led to these increased achievement scores. First, the school district has focused on research based instructional strategies to improve student achievement. The school district wants every teacher to have a “toolbox” of effective instructional strategies they can use to effectively teach students. Additionally, the school district is in the second year of a three year curriculum project that will result in the district’s curriculum being aligned to State (and when necessary) national standards. The school district believes that to continue the upward trend in these scores, more in-depth, systemic changes need to be made in the way in which our students are educated. The school district has started this process on many fronts, and College Board training is very important.

Ridgway Area School District Board Goals

Ridgway Area School District’s Board of Directors is focused on instruction and student achievement. The Board has adopted seven “non-negotiable” goals for instruction and student achievement. These goals serve as the focus of the Board over the next five years. The goals are:

**RASD 2010-2015 Goals
Presented and approved at the board meeting on 02/09/2010**

INSTRUCTION:

- RASD will ensure all classroom instruction is highly effective.
- RASD will provide professional development focused on highly effective instructional practices

ACHIEVEMENT:

- RASD students will become creative problem solvers with the ability to synthesize and analyze possible solutions to challenging problems.

- RASD students will receive comprehensive literacy skills that are based upon the most current research about learning.
- RASD will provide a safe environment, and, when necessary, students will receive appropriate intervention strategies.
- RASD will communicate achievement progress with all stakeholders.
- RASD will strive for 100% graduation rate.

These goals were developed at a Board retreat and serve as the foundation for educational and fiscal decisions made in the school district.

RASD Finances

Ridgway Area School District has prided itself on fiscal responsibility. Between 1997 and 2010 there were no property tax increases within the school district. The Board did approve a one mil tax increase for the 2010-2011 school year. The district has been able to be fiscally prudent through reducing staff through attrition and maintaining tight oversight on all expenditures. Additionally, the school district is currently using a five year budget projection model in an effort to stay aware of the fiscal realities facing the school district. Under the first scenario (see below) the district would realize a \$1,072,630 deficit at the end of five years even when raising taxes to the maximum allowed under Act I. This scenario assumes that the pension increases are what the district was told they would be this spring. Budget scenario #2 has the district realizing a similar deficit even when including a pension crisis "fix". It is obvious to the school district that a drastic decrease in expenditures is needed. With that in mind, the school district created a budget for the 2010-2011 school year in which the budget is 1.1% less than the previous year. This was achieved through a reduction in force of 3.5% (2% reduction in instructional staff). The district is also considering a further reduction in force of 8% in the upcoming budget to further reduce costs. If the school district is able to accomplish this task, the five year budget projection will have the school district at a \$7,911 surplus at the end of five years. Of course, property taxes must also increase every year for this scenario to work. I share this information because it is a valuable part of the story for Ridgway's enthusiasm for AP courses, but it is not THE factor in determining how the school district moves forward.

Scenario # 1

#3: CUSTOM MILLAGE INCREASES (LESS THAN ACT 1)		Estimated 2009-10	Preliminary 2010-11	Projected 2011-12	Projected 2012-13	Projected 2013-14	Projected 2014-15
Millage	% Increase Levied		3.07%	2.10%	2.60%	2.90%	3.70%
	Act 1 Millage	32.6000	33.6000	34.7858	36.7321	46.1337	49.1623
	Exceptions Millage		0.4703	1.0156	8.1014	1.2746	0.5864
	Total Millage	32.6000	34.0703	35.8013	44.8335	47.4082	49.7487
	Total Millage % Increase		4.51%	5.08%	25.23%	5.74%	4.94%
	Cumulative Act 1 Taxes Not Levied		(34,357)	(68,707)	(103,053)	(137,392)	(171,730)
Revenues	Total Local Revenue	4,783,678	4,806,474	4,894,693	5,746,413	6,007,534	6,247,923
	Total State Revenue	7,268,449	7,262,088	6,845,582	7,516,809	7,737,658	7,924,471
	Federal & Other Revenue	294,534	233,534	91,000	91,000	91,000	91,000
	TOTAL REVENUE	12,346,661	12,302,096	11,831,275	13,354,222	13,836,192	14,263,394
Total Expenditures		12,669,303	12,158,689	12,587,849	14,270,480	14,908,822	15,475,635
Surplus or Deficit		(322,642)	143,406	(756,573)	(916,258)	(1,072,630)	(1,212,241)
Ending Fund Balance - Unreserved		1,946,210	2,089,616	1,333,043	416,785	(655,845)	(1,868,086)
Ending % of Expenditures		15.4%	17.2%	10.6%	2.9%	-4.4%	-12.1%

This Scenario assumes no change in pension costs and increasing taxes to maximum Act 1 allowed.

Scenario #2

#3: CUSTOM MILLAGE INCREASES (LESS THAN ACT 1)		Estimated 2009-10	Preliminary 2010-11	Projected 2011-12	Projected 2012-13	Projected 2013-14	Projected 2014-15
Millage	% Increase Levied		3.07%	2.10%	2.60%	2.90%	3.70%
	Act 1 Millage	32.6000	33.6000	34.3056	35.4415	38.0271	41.4940
	Exceptions Millage		0.0000	0.2378	1.5139	1.9864	1.9890
	Total Millage	32.6000	33.6000	34.5434	36.9554	40.0135	43.4830
	Total Millage % Increase		3.07%	2.81%	6.98%	8.28%	8.67%
	Cumulative Act 1 Taxes Not Levied		(34,357)	(68,715)	(103,069)	(137,423)	(171,767)
Revenues	Total Local Revenue	4,783,678	4,763,749	4,780,419	5,030,726	5,335,761	5,678,715
	Total State Revenue	7,268,449	7,262,088	6,792,055	7,008,522	7,263,621	7,529,423
	Federal & Other Revenue	294,534	233,534	91,000	91,000	91,000	91,000
	TOTAL REVENUE	12,346,661	12,259,371	11,663,474	12,130,247	12,690,382	13,299,138
Total Expenditures		12,669,303	12,158,689	12,463,665	13,091,252	13,809,054	14,559,122
Surplus or Deficit		(322,642)	100,682	(800,191)	(961,004)	(1,118,672)	(1,259,985)
Ending Fund Balance - Unreserved		1,946,210	2,046,892	1,246,701	285,696	(832,976)	(2,092,960)
Ending % of Expenditures		15.4%	16.8%	10.0%	2.2%	-6.0%	-14.4%

This scenario assumes legislation passes lowering retirement contributions and raising taxes to maximum allowed under Act 1.

The Importance of A.P. Classes for Ridgway Area School District

Education and educational policy can be complicated. Oftentimes, I believe, it is made complicated to fit the policy initiatives of one or another interested party. Public education can be summed up in a rather simple question: How can we (the Nation, the State, the School District, administrators, teachers) provide the best education possible to our children? This question drives the work at Ridgway Area School District and frees us to look for opportunities. When we asked ourselves the preceding question, we felt that a foundational aspect that we must concentrate on to provide the best education to our children was rigor. The school district believes that the curriculum that is taught must be rigorous, instruction must be rigorous, and assessment must be rigorous. In other words, rigor is the foundation for everything that the

district is trying to accomplish for students. Rigor is also intertwined with the following concepts.

21st Century Skills. Recently, this term has been used (maybe overused) when discussing education policy, curriculum, and instruction. Ridgway Area School District believes that 21st Century skills mean that students will leave school with the skills and knowledge that will allow them to thrive in the society in which we live. For Ridgway, the dominant 21st Century skill is higher order thinking. If our students can leave school with the ability to find unique solutions to unique problems and apply previous learning to unique situations, we would feel that we have succeeded. The school district's duty to the community is to find out how to accomplish this task with educational integrity and fiscal responsibility. Higher order thinking must permeate all aspects of curriculum and instruction and be addressed to all students, regardless of perceived ability level. The school district must find a way to systemically embed rigor in all classes for all students. The A.P. classes and the A.P. teachers serve as the start to this process. The school district sent eight teachers to the one week AP seminars this summer. This training cost the school district over \$11,000 but we feel strongly that the investment in this training will start the process of increasing rigor in the classroom for all students.

Vertical Integration of A.P. Classes. The investment in teacher training for AP courses will impact more than the students that are taking the courses. Ridgway is starting a pilot program to include "pre-AP" in the middle school. This program will identify students who will be able to advance through to AP courses earlier in their high school career. The program will introduce a new level of rigor into the middle school curriculum in the courses that are taught. Further training for the middle school teachers will not only impact the students in the AP classes, but also all of the students who have the teacher in class.

Building capacity. Ridgway School District uses the training provided by the AP classes to build our own capacity. In other words, the high quality training that the teachers receive helps the school district achieve our non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction. The training that is provided by the College Board is essential to implement AP classes with integrity. Teachers must have the content knowledge and the technical AP test knowledge to assure that our students will continue to improve their test performance. Considering all of the training that is available to teachers and school districts, we feel that the AP training provides the best opportunities for our school district to increase rigor while also taking into account financial constraints.

Teachers that attended the week long trainings came back to the school district rejuvenated and excited to teach their subject area. Three teachers commented that "The training we received was the best training that I have received ever". Another teacher commented that "The things that I learned are being used in all of my classes right now". Finally, all of the teachers commented that the training was one of the few opportunities for trainings that concentrated on subject area content instead of pedagogical techniques. The last point is worth exploring a little

more. Our school district has spent time and money training teachers on research based, effective instructional strategies. This is very important and needs to be done. However, as one teacher told me, "Without the proper content knowledge, it is hard to teach any class effectively." The content knowledge that teachers received went beyond a typical professional development experience. All of them commented that they had homework to do every night (up to two hours a night) and they felt they got more from the content review because they were experienced in teaching the course beforehand. In other words, they could assimilate the intense content area knowledge better because they had taught the class themselves.

Teachers made a point to mention how interacting with other AP teachers and the instructors helped them learn more about teaching all students, not just AP students. The combination of a rigorous training experience coupled with highly motivated effective instructors created a learning experience that our school district would have an impossible time duplicating ourselves. By far, the teachers told me that this interaction with instructors and participants was the best outcome from the trainings. The teachers also commented on the collegiality and the *continued* interaction with the instructors and other participants that they are still enjoying months after the training ended. Finally, the teachers all mentioned the resources that they were given to take back to their classrooms to use. The Art teacher has already implemented a scoring guide into all of his art classes that is based on a resource that was given to him in the week long work shop. Another teacher commented that he figures he walked away with over \$500.00 worth of materials and resources that he can use in any of his classes. As you can see, the \$11,000 investment that Ridgway placed in this training for eight teachers was actually cheap when you consider all that the district has received in return.

In Closing

Ridgway Area School District is focused on improving student achievement. As a small district with limited resources, we must make sure that all of our resources are effectively used to help improve student achievement. As the school district considered the menu of training options available, we feel strongly that AP training offers the best opportunity for our school district to increase rigor in all of our classrooms. The training provided by the College Board positions the school district to build our own capacity for rigor. The teachers and the administration of the school district believe that the high quality training offered by the College Board will significantly change the culture of the school. Teachers were also adamant that College Board training will help all of the students in all of their classes. As mentioned earlier in this testimony, the resources and knowledge that teachers receive is used in all of the classes to all of the students. The district will use the College Board training to help meet the Board goals and improve education for all students.

Thank you for your time today and I would be happy to answer any questions at the appropriate time.