

NEW TRIER TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 203



To commit minds to inquiry, hearts to compassion, and lives to the service of humanity.®

Ellen Ambuehl
Director of Special Education

January 14, 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

Over the past two years, I have become familiar with the Chasing Hope Foundation and its mission to provide local residential options to high school students unable to live safely at home. As a high school special education director, I am involved in the placement of students into special education programs to meet their educational needs. Unfortunately, there are students who struggle with mental health needs to such a significant degree that they often act in aggressive and unpredictable ways that prevent them from living safely at home. Due to the limited number of facilities serving such students in Illinois, much less within the north suburban region, IEP teams are often forced to look for appropriate placements outside of the state. The distance this puts between students and their families causes stress for all members of the family and can slow progress as students have less opportunity to practice functional skills they are learning in their local community.

When an IEP team makes the decision to place a student residentially, it is the responsibility of the school district to fund the tuition and room and board in its entirety for schools that have been approved (through an application process) by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). Currently the state reimburses tuition for any amount above two times the district operational expenditure per pupil. Although through 2013, 100% of room and board costs were reimbursed to school districts, in 2014, due to a shortage of funds available, reimbursement was prorated to 60%.

As a specific example, New Trier currently has a student attending Wediko School, a well-regarded not-for-profit residential placement that works with students with mental health and autism spectrum needs. Annual tuition for this student is \$59,492. With an FY 15 operational expenditure per pupil of \$22,123, the amount, New Trier is reimbursed from ISBE is \$15,246. Additionally, New Trier is responsible for room and board costs which total \$77,471 annually and is reimbursed for 60% of this amount or \$46,482. The result of this reimbursement schedule is a net cost of \$75,235. Although costs may vary from one residential placement to another, with 8 students currently placed residentially, it is a significant financial burden for even a school district like New Trier.

By offering a local option for residential services, these costs could be reduced substantially. More importantly, students will have an opportunity to work on family relationships and independent functioning in their home community and potentially progress to a point of not requiring residential supports in the future. I would be happy to speak further if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ellen Ambuehl".

Ellen Ambuehl
Director of Special Education