

Friday, January 30, 2009

Dear Conserve School Community,

We are writing to bring you up-to-date on the *State of the School* meeting held today. The purpose of the meeting was to explain the impact of the economic downturn on Conserve School and how we as a school plan to respond to this challenging situation.

While uncertainties abound, most experts predict that the country will experience a protracted period of depressed economic activity that will extend through the 2009/10 school year and beyond. Accordingly, it is essential that we take action now. We have spent considerable time evaluating how to best manage our resources now and in the future. In evaluating the School's options, our focus has been on fiscal prudence and long-term financial sustainability. In these discussions we kept Jim Lowenstine's vision front and center, as we always must.

Like the investment portfolios of other schools, colleges and universities, the Conserve School Trust endowment has been negatively impacted by the market decline. In comparison to many other private schools, Conserve provides a relatively high level of financial aid to its students and receives little in the way of outside donations due to its limited alumni base. Hence Conserve is dependent, to a large degree, on income generated from the investments of the Trust to fund school operations. In light of the current economic crisis those funds are likely to be less than what has been available in prior years, and we must plan for that.

What does this mean for our school? It means we need to adapt by implementing a significant change in our school model without sacrificing the values and vision of Jim Lowenstine.

The Board decided that beginning in the 2009/10 school year, Conserve School will transition from being a four year, college preparatory boarding school, to a semester boarding school, primarily for 11th graders. Similar to a semester abroad program, a semester school provides secondary school students the opportunity to study for half an academic year with a focused curricular interest, in our case conservation and ecology. You can learn more about this in the attached Conserve School Semester Program Fact Sheet.

We understand that the most pressing issue for you is how this change impacts those children who are currently students here. Below is a brief overview to answer your immediate questions. We have attached expanded grade level specific information with this letter.

1. We will finish the current school year with no curriculum or extracurricular changes. Everything will remain the same, including graduation of the current 12th graders in May 2009.
2. All current 11th graders who are in good standing will be able to return and finish their senior year. Tuition will be waived for every current 11th grader who chooses to return. There will, however, be changes in the curriculum in keeping with the new format. The curriculum will focus on nature studies, ecology and the science of conservation. Team sports will be eliminated and replaced with expanded outdoor activities and intramural sports. While the curriculum will change in scope, the high quality and challenging level of academics will remain the same.

the dream...

the school...

the future...

the dream...

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3. Current 10th graders in good standing will have the option of applying for enrollment for either one semester or their whole junior year. Those who are admitted will also attend without tuition. For those not continuing at Conserve School, we will assist them in finding other school options.
4. Current 9th graders will have to find other options and will be assisted in that process.
5. Students who are at Conserve School through an outside scholarship organization will be receiving additional information from us separately.

Over the past seven years we have worked hard to create a world class college preparatory school with extraordinary results of which we can all be proud. Unfortunately, the economic downturn forced the Board to look at alternative models that would be true to the vision set forth by Jim Lowenstine. We revisited the three main goals central to that vision.

1. Educating children about ecology, nature, and the science of conservation.
2. Engaging children in outdoor activities such as hiking, boating, camping, and outdoor exploration.
3. Providing educational opportunity to children who might have the interest but not the access to Conserve School programs.

While the current program does a good job of achieving these goals, it expends significant resources and energy on activities and programs that are necessary only if these goals are pursued in a four year college preparatory program. The board spent considerable time, thought and dialogue evaluating viable program options while keeping the integrity of Lowenstine's vision front and center. The semester school not only achieves Jim Lowenstine's vision but it also enables Conserve to reach out to more students at a significantly lower cost than the current program.

We realize that this is a significant change for Conserve School. Every effort will be made to ensure a smooth transition and we appreciate and value your support during that process. Stefan Anderson will continue to provide leadership and guidance as we move into the transition year and in the years to come.

For current families we have outlined the next steps for you to take **by grade** in the attachment and ask that you review it carefully. You will find the plan for your child's grade, the person for you to call to discuss your child's education plan, and a meeting schedule.

We know this change will be a disruption and we deeply regret that. We firmly believe that the Conserve School Semester Program is the right model to respond to the dramatic changes in the economic and investment environment, and that it will in fact continue to engage and inspire young men and women in the way Jim Lowenstine intended for many years to come.

Sincerely,

Ronald V. Kazmar
Managing Trustee

Stefan Anderson
Head of School

What does this change mean for a freshman?

It's Conserve School's intention that the last semester of this year will continue on unchanged. Financial support of the current program will not be affected by this decision. Classes and programs will carry on as scheduled.

Next year Conserve School will begin to make the transition to a Semester School model. Because Conserve School will not have a sophomore class next year, current freshmen will need to attend a different high school starting next fall.

As an expression of our good will toward members of this class, freshmen who are in good standing at the end of this year will automatically be accepted to the Conserve School Semester program for one semester of their junior year. Students who choose to accept this invitation may attend free of charge. We will give priority to these students when we fill openings in the inaugural year of the Conserve School Semester program (2010-2011).

During the coming months, Conserve School staff members will be available to assist freshmen in making the transition to another school. Ways in which we can help include:

- Writing letters of recommendation.
- Providing information to other schools about our curriculum to assist in placement of students in appropriate courses.
- Speaking on the phone to staff members of other schools.
- For those students interested in attending another independent (day or boarding) school, providing assistance in locating an appropriate school.

If you would like assistance in any of these areas, please contact Martha Krumenauer, Academic Coordinator. Martha will be facilitating support of freshmen class members as we go through this transition.

If you would like to contact Martha she can be reached at:

(715) 547-1328
Martha.Krumenauer@ConserveSchool.org

What does this change mean for a sophomore?

Next year Conserve School will be in transition to the Conserve School Semester program, scheduled to open in the fall of 2010. During this Transition Year (2009-2010), we will enroll a student body of 30-45 students. Current juniors in good standing will be invited to stay at Conserve School for the Transition Year so that they can complete their senior year and graduate from Conserve School.

Therefore, current juniors will be given priority for admission to next year's program. Based on space availability, current sophomores in good standing may apply to attend as well. We anticipate that only a limited number of slots will be available so this option may be available to only a limited number of current sophomores. Those sophomores who apply and are accepted for the Transition Year program may attend Conserve School for one more year free of charge. After participating in the Transition Year program as juniors, these students will then transfer to a different high school. Sophomores interested in applying for the Transition Year program should review the attached Transition Year program description.

Those students not attending the Transition Year program will finish this year at Conserve School and then enroll in another school for the fall 2009. Conserve School staff members will be available to assist students with the process of selecting and enrolling in a different high school. Ways in which we can help include:

- Writing letters of recommendation.
- Providing information to other schools about our curriculum to assist in placement of students in appropriate courses.
- Speaking on the phone to staff members of other schools.
- For those students interested in attending another independent (day or boarding) school, providing assistance in locating an appropriate school.

If you would like assistance in any of these areas, please contact Mary Anna Thornton, Assistant Head of School for Academics. Mary Anna will be facilitating support of sophomore class members as we go through this transition.

If you would like to contact Mary Anna she can be reached at:

(715) 547-1319
MaryAnna.Thornton@ConserveSchool.org

What does this change mean for a junior?

Next year Conserve School will be in transition to the Conserve School Semester program, scheduled to open in the fall of 2010. During this Transition Year (2009-2010), we will enroll a student body of 30-45 students. Current juniors in good standing will be invited to stay at Conserve School for the Transition Year so that they can complete their senior year and graduate from Conserve School. As an indication of our good will toward members of this class, attendance in next year's program will be free of charge. While the curriculum will change in scope, the high quality and challenging level of academics will remain the same. Juniors who continue through the Transition Year to become seniors will be well-prepared for college through the Transition Year program. For more details about the curriculum, please review the attached Transition Year program.

Conserve School staff members will be available to assist any juniors who choose to attend a different school for their senior year. Ways in which we can help students make this transition include:

- Writing letters of recommendation.
- Providing information to other schools about our curriculum to assist in placement of students in appropriate courses.
- Speaking on the phone to staff members of other schools.
- For those students interested in attending another independent (day or boarding) school, providing assistance in locating an appropriate school.

If you would like assistance in any of these areas, please contact Kathleen O'Connor, Academic Dean. Kathleen will be facilitating support of junior class members as we go through this transition.

If you would like to contact Kathleen she can be reached at:

(715) 547-1368
Kathleen.OConnor@ConserveSchool.org

What does this change mean for a senior?

It's Conserve School's intention that the last semester of this year will continue on unchanged. Financial support of the current program will not be affected by this decision. Classes and programs will carry on as scheduled.

You will have a very special place in the history of Conserve School as the last class to graduate from the original four-year Conserve School program. We are very proud of your accomplishments and the accomplishments of all of the students who have made the seven years of the Conserve School four-year program so exceptional. As graduating seniors of the 2008-2009 school year, you will serve as representatives of all of the students who have attended Conserve School. We expect that this year's graduation will be exceptionally well-attended by alumni and will be a very memorable and moving ceremony. We hope that you can help us in planning this year's graduation as a very special ceremony, and treasured memory, for all Conserve School students, staff, alumni, and friends in attendance.

While current juniors and some sophomores will be able to continue at Conserve School next year, freshmen and most sophomores will be transitioning to other schools. Some may return eventually as Conserve School Semester program students. It is to be expected, however, that these younger students will be disappointed that they cannot continue in a four-year Conserve School program. We will look to our senior class members to help younger students overcome this disappointment and maintain a positive sense of school spirit for the remainder of the year.

In future years Conserve School will continue to support and maintain contact with you, our alumni. We will continue to encourage all of you to contact the school whenever you are in need of assistance with school documents or would simply like to keep in touch. While we are undergoing a structural and programmatic change, we are retaining many of the same staff and services and will continue to be available to you and interested in your progress.

Conserve School

Transition Year Fact Sheet

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The Founder's Wishes

The following are excerpts from the James R. Lowenstine Trust that speak to the program of study and who the students should be.

Article VI A.(8) "to prescribe a school curriculum which must include instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic and shall comply as nearly as the trustees deem practicable with the requirements set by school officials of the State of Wisconsin and which also shall, to the extent the trustees deem practicable, include nature study (and in particular the study of the ecology of unspoiled forest and lake areas such as Lowenwood), instruction in outdoor sports including skiing, use of snow shoes, archery, ice skating, target practice, swimming, fishing, boating, camping, sledding, methods of survival in unexplored areas, and other outdoor activities;"

Article VI J. "It is my hope that some students may be instructed or trained at the Conserve School so as to prepare them for or incline them toward ultimate employment in some activity related to the preservation and use of forests, lakes and streams for public recreation without spoliation, and in the general science of the conservation of natural resources."

Article VI H. "I direct that students admitted to the Conserve School be persons deemed by the trustees to be honest, of good moral character, mentally alert, and in good health. Such students may include those who, because of lack of funds, might not otherwise be able to afford the benefits of instruction at an institution such as the Conserve School, and may also include those whose lack of material advantages is such that they would receive more than normal benefits from instruction in the open air environment to be provided for the school."

Conserve School Transition Year: 2009-2010

The 2009-2010 school year will be a year of transition from Conserve School's existing four-year program to a new semester based program. The curriculum and activities during the Transition Year will be offered in alignment with the goals of the Semester Program. As a result, the curriculum will change in scope; however, the high quality of academics will remain the same.

Note that the semester program is designed primarily for students during 11th grade. In addition, the program will be flexible enough to accommodate advanced 10th graders, 12th graders, and students wishing to do a post graduate experience the year after graduating from high school. However, next year's program will be set at a level that is appropriate for those juniors and sophomores from Conserve School who enroll.

Student Body

Enrollment in the Transition Year will mirror our expectations for the Semester Program. The Semester Program will enroll 30 to 45 students each semester. Up to 45 current Conserve School students will have the first opportunity to enroll for the Transition Year. It is our hope that many current juniors and sophomores will take advantage of that opportunity. Provided there is space available there may be room for additional students.

Academic Curriculum

- Students will take five or six courses each semester.
- Students will progress to the next level in Math and Modern language.
- Students will take a designated history, English, and science course each semester.
- These courses will be at the customary challenging college-preparatory level and will include a strong emphasis on the natural world and environmental themes.
- Science will focus one semester on the science of renewable energy and the other semester on biology and environmental science.
- Students will be able to choose one elective each semester. The elective choices will focus on topics related to the natural world and environmental issues. Students may as an alternative take a Wisconsin Virtual School online course as an elective.
- Conserve School teachers will be adapting these courses from existing Conserve School courses during the upcoming semester and summer.
- In addition, students will have the option of taking a new class designed to prepare them for college admissions. This course will include standardized test preparation, college essay writing, and assistance in choosing colleges.
- Advanced Placement courses will be available for Calculus, Spanish, Chinese, and Environmental Science. Additional AP courses may be available.
- Physical education will not be scheduled as a class. Regular, required outdoor activities will help keep students fit. (No healthy days.)

Tuition and Affordability

For the Transition Year the tuition and the supply fee will be waived. There may be some optional activities during the year that will have fees attached to them.

Tuition and fees for the Semester Program have not yet been set. Jim Lowenstine expressed his wish that “students may include those who, because of lack of funds, might not otherwise be able to afford the benefits of instruction at an institution such as the Conserve School, and may also include those whose lack of material advantages is such that they would receive more than normal benefits from instruction in the open air environment to be provided for the school.” To that end Conserve School is in the process of establishing a tuition and fee model in alignment with Jim’s wishes.

Calendar

The fall semester will start August 22th and finish December 18th. The spring semester will start January 24th and finish May 28th with graduation on May 30th.

- Semester 1 will be 16 weeks in length. Semester 2 will be 17 weeks in length to accommodate an extra week for AP tests.
- The school starting date and ending date will be similar to previous years.
- There will be no Winterim. Instead students will have a 5-week break. Teachers will have a 3-week in-service period during that time.
- Students and teachers will participate in an Exploration Week both Semester 1 and Semester 2.
- All students will participate in occasional overnight camping trips.
- Each semester will have one week of break.

Extracurricular

- The program will not include interscholastic sports.
- All-school afternoon, evening, and Saturday activities will include intramural sports and other activities with an emphasis on appreciating the outdoors.
- Outdoor activities will be a regular part of the program.
- Emphasis will be placed on providing students with outdoor experiences and skills.

Teaching Staff

- We are offering teaching positions to several current Conserve School teachers.
- The teaching staff will be made up of 8 teachers.
- The teaching staff will work closely together to develop an integrated curriculum focused on the natural world and environmental themes.

Daily Schedule

Classes meet for an average of 250 minutes per week, with the exception of the required science courses, which meet for an average of 375 minutes per week. English, history, and elective classes are 100 minutes in length, science courses are 150 minutes in length, and the Conserve – College Admissions Prep (C-CAP) course is 50 minutes in length. Classes meet on alternate days following the AB schedule shown at right.

Twice a week and on Saturdays, students participate in after school athletic and outdoor activities. While the weather is warm, activities will range from organized intramural sports such as soccer, ultimate Frisbee, and volleyball to more individual activities such as walking the campus trails, biking, archery, and canoeing or kayaking on Big Donahue Lake. When the weather turns colder, indoor activities such as racquetball, pick-up basketball, aerobics, indoor volleyball, and climbing on the wall will augment winter sports like cross country skiing, ice skating, and snowshoeing.

Registration and Enrollment

- Students will receive more detailed information about the curriculum by March 1st along with applications for the program.
- Applications will be due March 15th.

		Semester Program	
		A Day	B Day
8:00 – 8:25		Breakfast	Breakfast
8:30 – 10:10		Modern Language & Math	Modern Language & Math
10:15 – 11:55		English or History	Elective
12:00 – 12:55		Lunch	Lunch
1:00 – 1:50		Science	C-CAP
1:55 – 3:35		Science	History or English
3:45 – 5:30		Outdoor Activities	Fine Arts Options & Free Time

Semester Schools: Great Opportunities

by Mark Braun

Over the last twenty years, there has been tremendous growth in the range of educational opportunities available to young Americans. The advent of semester schools has played no small part in this trend. Similar in many ways to semester-abroad programs, semester schools provide secondary school students the opportunity to leave their home school for half an academic year to have a very different kind of experience—the experience of living and learning within a small community, among diverse students, and in a new and different place. The curricula of such schools tend to be thematic, interdisciplinary, rigorous, and experiential.

What are the benefits?

As a starting point for their programs, semester schools have embraced many of the qualities typical of independent schools. In fact, a number of semester schools were developed as extension programs by existing independent schools, providing unusual opportunities to their own students and those from other schools. Other semester schools have grown from independent educational organizations or foundations that bring their own educational interests and expertise to their semester programs. In both cases, semester schools provide the kind of challenging environment for which independent schools are known.

Across the board, semester school programs provide students with exceptional opportunities for contact with their teachers. Individual instruction and intimate classes are common, as is contact with teachers outside the classroom. At semester schools, students have a full-immersion experience in a tightly knit learning community. In such a setting, teachers are able to challenge each student in his or her own area of need, mentoring students to both academic and personal fulfillment.

The curriculum

Semester schools have developed around specialized curricular interests, often involving unique offerings or nontraditional subjects. In almost every case, these specialized curricula are related to the school's location. Indeed, place-based learning is a common thread in semester school education. Whether in New York City or the Appalachian Mountains, semester schools enable students to cultivate a sense of place and develop greater sensitivity to their surroundings. This is often accomplished through a combination of experiential education and traditional instruction. Students develop academic knowledge and practical skills in tandem through active participation in intellectual discourse, creative projects, hands-on exercises, and service learning opportunities. Throughout, emphasis is placed on the importance of combining intellectual exploration with thoughtful self-reflection, often facilitated by journaling exercises or group processing activities.

At semester schools, students inevitably learn their most important lessons through their membership in the school community. Living closely with peers and teachers and working together for the benefit of the group enables students to develop extraordinary communication skills and high levels of interpersonal accountability. Through this experience, students gain invaluable leadership and cooperation skills.

Ultimately, semester schools seek to impart translatable skills to their students. The common goal is for students to return to their schools and families with greater motivation, empathy, self-knowledge, and self-determination. These skills help to prepare students for the college experience and beyond. In addition, semester school participants report that their experiences helped to distinguish them in the college application process. Semester school programs are certainly not for everybody, but they serve an important role for students who are seeking something beyond the ordinary—students who wish to know themselves and the world in a profound way.

Mark Braun is Head of School, The Outdoor Academy.

What's Next

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