

**Sudbury Public Schools
Sudbury, Massachusetts**

DATE: May 15, 2007

Dear Parents/Guardians

Most members of our school community are aware that the grade four Sudbury Odyssey program is a valued, long-standing tradition. It provides memorable experiences that many students carry well beyond their elementary school days. The trip originally started over 30 years ago as a wilderness experience for some students, in one or two classes, at the Haynes School. Through the years, it moved to a second elementary school when key staff members from Haynes transferred and took the trip with them. It became a district-wide experience in the late eighties and since then has been modified and evolved into the four-day, three night program set in New Hampshire that involves more than three hundred students district-wide.

We recognize Odyssey's importance to many students, parents, and teachers as a valuable bonding experience, one that builds self-confidence and independence, and provides critical experiential learning related to our natural environment. In recognition of its value, the trip has been modified and changed over the years to make sure it remains viable, safe and valuable. That is where we are again.

While it might seem that our suggestion that the trip needs a revision comes out of the blue; in reality, our administration, nurses and teachers have worked hard in each of the last four years to overcome problems and drawbacks to keep it going. This year as the staff has worked to prepare for the trip, it became clear that the problems needed a more comprehensive solution so we could count on Odyssey each year. Why are we bringing this forward in May? Because we have been working thoughtfully on the future of Odyssey all year, we want a solution in time for the 2007-08 school year, we want parent and student input and suggestions, and we want to utilize time over the summer for a panel to work to develop what the trip will look like next year. One final point, you may be aware that annually we receive comments from parents both in support of the program and with concerns; while always informative, these comments were not the genesis of our review of Odyssey.

The problems we must address in order to keep an Odyssey experience for our students in the future include:

- Our ability to staff the trip as it is currently defined and with its current objective, has become very problematic. For each school, we generally require a minimum of two staff members per class and one administrator to be present at all times. This is a safety and supervision necessity but causes an impact on other grade levels or programs during the trip. Staff members have never been required to attend Odyssey. Rather, they have volunteered their time, without compensation, year after year. Many key personnel are now finding they can no longer commit to the trip that takes them away from their families and other commitments, 24 hours a day for four days. This creates a safety concern, weakens the curriculum connection between the trip and the classroom, and causes even more

- classrooms, programs and grade levels in a school to be impacted as other staff members are called on to volunteer and accompany the trip.
- The current scheduling of the trip falls within the state mandated MCAS window. The state allows us three weeks to complete fourth grade testing and all make-up tests. Because we are locked into the current schedule by the availability of the camps, the schools that attend during the first session must complete MCAS and make-up exams in only two weeks. This scheduling creates inequities between schools and is also more difficult to accomplish.
 - Accountability for academic achievement in core subject areas in grades 3 – 8 has certainly been heightened with No Child Left Behind, the public scrutiny of annual MCAS scores, and our own personal high standards. Curricula have been expanded as well as the variety of other important programs (health education, technology, fine arts, world language, bridges, DARE, etc.) that need to be included in the school day. Teachers and administrators feel great pressure to cover all the material expected at the fourth grade and in preparation for the fifth grade, while ensuring success of the Odyssey trip that requires a considerable investment of time throughout the school year, especially in the second half of the year leading up to MCAS testing.
 - The significant amount of time needed to plan, prepare for, and implement Odyssey has encroached on instructional time, not only for grade four classrooms but across classrooms within each school. Teachers, administrators and nurses dedicate a substantial number of hours leading up to trip outside of their regular responsibilities. In order to complete all the tasks, 4th grade teachers are often given times during the day, with substitutes covering their classes. Teachers report to us that, over and above the actual trip, they spend over 60 hours planning and preparing for Odyssey during their workday and 40 to 50 hours outside the workday. Parents provide a significant service in the preparation for the trip, but much of the work can not be shifted to parents.
 - We whole-heartedly believe that all students are entitled to be included in important experiences such as Odyssey even though ever-increasing developmental issues and medical concerns among student populations may sometimes challenge our efforts. Excluding such students is not an option and preparing and delivering an alternative experience for those students not attending requires even more time and planning.
 - We continue to consider the age appropriateness of this trip. We often ask, “Is this four-day, three-night experience, 2 ½ hours from home appropriate for 9 and 10 year olds?”
 - Expanded responsibilities and associated liabilities have become a serious concern to all. During the trip, teachers often find themselves discomforted and conflicted about serving in a more parent-like role with some students, and occasionally needing to have difficult discussions and redirect some adult chaperones.

These are some of the most salient factors that have caused us to reflect upon and rethink the current Odyssey model.

The process to gather parent and student input includes:

- This letter as the first introduction to the issue. We hope you will think about the value of the trip, recognize the issues that exist and help us find a way to create a trip that overcomes the barriers while maintaining the memorable and educational aspects of Odyssey.
- Please feel free to make your thoughts and concerns known to the superintendent and school committee. Each email is read and while a score card is not kept, the benefits and concerns expressed are highly informative and helpful.
- A questionnaire will solicit input from parents/guardians through the use of an online information tool, *Zoomerang*. You will receive information about how to access this questionnaire from your school principal within the next seven to ten days. This information will be valuable in helping us make a final decision on trip parameters and hopefully provide new and exciting aspects that might enhance the experience for all.
- Upon the conclusion of this year's trip, each school principal will gather input, reactions and suggestions from the 4th and 5th grade students.
- A Parent Forum is planned for Curtis Middle School Auditorium on Thursday, June 14th, at 7:00 p.m. This will be an opportunity for us to share where we are on the work we continue to do on this issue, and to gather ideas on what might be considered as we develop the parameters for the future trip.
- The administrative team will then consider what we know and what we've learned and establish the goals of Odyssey, as well as the parameters, outline and characteristics of the experience. This will be shared broadly to students, parents and staff before the end of June.
- An Odyssey Planning Team will be employed in the summer of 2007 to develop the actual format and agenda for Odyssey 2008.

As administrators, we have given long and thoughtful consideration to the circumstances and issues expressed above. As a result, we have identified one plan for addressing the issues mentioned above. This option would include the following modifications:

- Sudbury Odyssey will remain a grade four program, but be conducted in the month of June, rather than May, to avoid conflict with MCAS testing.
- The program will continue to be experiential and include the objectives of environmental study, team building and personal growth and development.
- The Odyssey venue should be closer to Sudbury which would overcome several of the concerns mentioned above.
- The duration of the program should be three days in length, depending upon the redesign of program components.
- A variety of staffing options must be considered given that, as a district sponsored trip, it must include appropriate school staff to plan, conduct and supervise the entire experience.
- Eliminating or modifying the overnight aspect in the experience may address many of the issues.

We realize that the above is but one option to meet our objectives. It highlights the type of factors that must be considered when developing a final recommendation. We will continue to explore this further. We want your assistance in working through this to ensure that any modifications will improve the experience for all, retain to a large extent the purpose and outcomes that have characterized Odyssey through the years, and address many of our on-going concerns.

Thank you for taking the time to read this rather long letter and offering to be part of the solution.

s/ Dr. John R. Brackett, Superintendent of Schools
Robert Milley, Assistant Superintendent of Schools
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