

www.mcall.com/news/all-online1.7075138nov04,0,5302417.story

## themorningcall.com

### High school clubs fall victim to budget cuts in Bethlehem

By Steve Esack

OF THE MORNING CALL

November 4, 2009

Freedom High School Principal Mike LaPorta knows the classroom alone often is not enough to make teenagers feel like part of a community. After-school clubs also help them find their niche.

So last month, it crushed LaPorta when he had to eliminate 28 of 51 non-curricular clubs at his Bethlehem Township school because he had a limited amount of money to cover teacher stipends as club advisers.

[Click here to see the status of clubs and activities](#)

Gone were the Bible, Gay-Straight Alliance, German, French, Young Republicans, Young Democrats clubs and others. A total of 600 students lost memberships to clubs, which carried stipends of about \$354 each.

"It was difficult," he said. "I'm looking at picking and choosing what kids' club deserves priority over another kids' clubs."

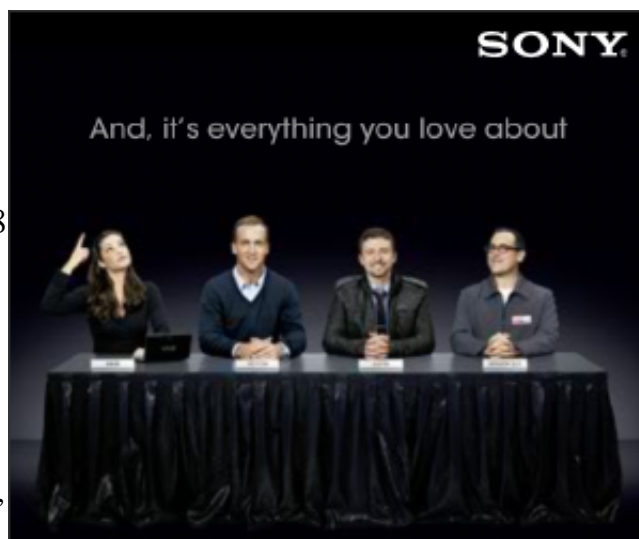
It's the same story at Liberty, Bethlehem Area School District's other high school. Liberty Principal JoAnn Durante also slashed the number of clubs by more than half to eliminate about \$11,696 in stipend costs.

Some of Liberty's eliminated clubs: Audio Visual Aides, Mini Globe Trotters, Mock Trial, Video Game and Wiccan.

Now, a few months into the school year, the decision to allot just \$30,000 for after-school clubs at each high school has ignited debate among board members, administrators and the teachers union.

At a committee meeting Monday, school board President Loretta Leeson said the cuts, made as a result of the district's financial woes, went too far.

She asked Interim Superintendent Thomas E. Persing, who came on board after the budget took effect, to look for money to restore some of the clubs.



Persing agreed. Last month, Persing donated his own money to cover teacher stipends to keep Freedom's Latino Club and Liberty's Teen Summit Club going.

Persing said the Boy Scouts may agree to fund some clubs, which he did not name.

But board member Gene McKeon questioned the need to debate the issue now. "This is a budgetary decision and we asked the professionals to dole it out as best they can," McKeon said.

Board member Rosie Amato agreed. He said if one club is restored, they all should be restored.

Board Vice President Judith Dexter asked if it is legally possible for community members to volunteer their time to run clubs.

Teachers union President Jolene Vitalos responded by saying the union would back Persing's attempt to find outside funding to pay for teachers' stipends. But the union would fight an attempt to use volunteers to fill roles previously held by a paid teacher.

"We would view that as subcontracting our work," Vitalos said.

Thomas Washington, assistant superintendent for human resources, took a different view. He said a volunteer could be used to fill an adviser position that had been vacant, such as Liberty's Mock Trial and Debate Team clubs.

"We are not subcontracting business because we don't have anyone in that business," Washington retorted. "We'd probably end up in arbitration."

Before the meeting, LaPorta said he tried to be fair when he made his cuts. He kept academic clubs such as Scholastic Scrimmage and Science Olympiad, which have competitive events. He kept high-profile clubs, such as the student newspaper, National Honor Society, student council, yearbook and drama, which puts on a fall play and spring musical.

The academic and high-profile clubs had the highest contracted stipends, ranging from \$588 to nearly \$3,000 each.

After that, LaPorta said, most of his budget was gone. He eliminated all language, hobby or cultural clubs because it would not have been right to keep some and not others.

The district had a budget deficit last year caused in part by rising debt costs. To balance the budget, the board and administration of now retired Superintendent Joseph Lewis raised taxes 5.1 percent and made two separate budget cuts totaling \$8.4 million.

Copyright © 2009, [The Morning Call](#)