



Small High School, Smaller Neighborhood Schools, School Closure Considerations Superintendent's Report for December 8, 2009 Board Meeting

For several years demographic trends have indicated that by 2014-15 PSD enrollment at the high school level would exceed the program capacity of the four comprehensive high schools. Program capacity is defined as 85% of the enrollment capacity and is a figure used for planning purposes. With grade reconfiguration, Poudre High School and Rocky Mountain High School have far exceeded the program capacity numbers. Additionally, Liberty Common has plans to expand its K-9 program that possibly will impact PSD enrollment. These two factors have affected the enrollment trends PSD observed when considering the interest in planning a small high school in the future.

Another reason for the district's decision to direct the Facility Planning Committee to consider a plan for a small high school was not only to consider building efficiencies, but also to identify a purpose for schools being considered for closure. The district anticipated that low elementary enrollment figures would require the public to consider the closure of an elementary school to "infill" surrounding schools. The district heard questions about how the school would be utilized when Moore Elementary was identified as a potential school for closure in 2006. As a result, the district asked the Facility Planning Committee to consider schools that may be repurposed for a small specialty high school.

In planning for bringing these issues to the community, the district discussed these topics with the Board of Education at different work sessions anticipating phases for the work to progress regarding facility usage. The district's working plan for approaching the PSD community around the issues of closure, small high schools, and optimal enrollment capacity was affected by the Facility Planning Committee's naming schools in a preliminary recommendation. In order to prioritize district facility usage, the district targeted two tasks for the Feasibility Committee at the September work session. In the short term the committee is to examine: where to move Lab School, whether to close Red Feather, and moving Early Childhood programs out of Barton and Fullana to other schools. The second task was to consider repurposing an elementary school for a small high school.

Next Steps

Given the changes mentioned earlier to high school enrollment projections and the need for a small high school, it is not prudent at this time for the district to continue pursuing the study of a small high school and the repurposing of either Riffenburgh or Lopez.

With two schools named as possible sites for a high school and school closure, the community has justifiably sought answers regarding the need for the school and the rationale for why their school was chosen. It appears prudent to recognize that the district in the future may or may not wish to consider a smaller stand-alone high school. Respecting characteristics of a building that would make it a candidate for a small high school, clearer programming needs are

required to determine direction. Regarding the small high school two important concepts remain for study: Should the district consider a stand alone small high school designed to address a unique curricular pathway in some location? Or, should the district attempt to incorporate more specialized programs in the four comprehensive high schools?

Given the current situation the district will separate the consideration of the small high school from the charge to the feasibility committee. This change suggests three actions: First, is to convene a group to look at the two questions of a small high school more conceptually without first identifying a small high school site. This committee would focus on the two questions identified earlier.

Second, remove from consideration Riffenburgh or Lopez as a small high school as a site for a small high school. Riffenburgh would continue to be considered as a location for early childhood and other existing programs to utilize the capacity of the school. Lopez would no longer be considered for closure because the conditions that led the Facility Planning Committee to identify the school for a repurposed high school are being reconsidered.

At the same time the district wants to clear up confusion that exists about identification of schools for closure by the Facility Planning Committee. Earlier, when the district formed the Feasibility Committee, it narrowed the district work to the areas identified to be studied by the committee. Due to conflicting messages, members of the community have asked for clarification of the district's intentions. Currently, PSD has no plans to close Cache La Poudre Middle School, Lopez Elementary School, Moore Elementary School, Riffenburgh Elementary School, or Stove Prairie Elementary School. At the same time, it is important to realize that given the reality that population trends and funding factors can change, in the future the district will be reviewing elementary and middle school capacity and may consider any school for closure.

Third, and possibly most important action is the Board and district's intention to bring to the PSD community's attention the pressing issue of funding small schools or closing some schools to combine students into larger elementary or middle schools. In January 2010 the Board and district will begin conducting several public deliberation sessions to consider the community's many points of view in these topics. Presently with student based budgeting the district can demonstrate how much is spent to support small schools. Additionally, the district can explain to the public how different school sizes affect the ability of the schools to offer programs for students in areas like art, physical education and music in the elementary schools. At the same time, the district can illustrate how schools are being utilized. The issue of closing schools is driven by the large number of vacant seats or the unused capacity in many elementary schools. By closing a school, students from that school can join other schools and allow the remaining schools to increase in size.

By stepping back and having this broader discussion, the district is acknowledging the expressed public interest in valuing neighborhood schools. As the district approaches more challenging financial circumstances, the community will help the district understand to what extent it values neighborhood schools.