

Monday
February 27, 2017
6:00 P.M.

The New Castle Community School Board met in a special work session at the Community Education Center on Monday, February 27, 2017. Those present were: Mrs. Nannett Polk, Mrs. Elizabeth Whitmer, Mr. Jamey Marcum, Mr. Travis Callaway, Mr. Kim Williamson, Mr. Stephen Fisher, Superintendent of Schools; Mr. William Pheffer, Assistant Superintendent; Mrs. Sherri Bergum, Curriculum Director; Mrs. Megan Bell, Director of Finance; and Dr. Greg Crider, Corporation Attorney.

Others present were Lora Wilson, Stefanie Eikenberry, Debby Raines, Amy Blake, Nicholas Middleton, James Carson, Dustin Chew, Jacob White, Jean Ann McAllister, and Travis Weik.

The purpose of the special work session was to discuss creating a 6th Grade Center at Sunnyside and returning Kindergarten classes to their neighborhood schools.

Mrs. Whitmer explained funding for all-day Kindergarten was extended to only Title I schools in the past. In order to provide all day classes, students were moved from Riley and Westwood to Sunnyside to create a Kindergarten Center. Also, students in grades 4-5-6 have been moved from Sunnyside to Eastwood. Currently being considered is moving all 6th Grade students to the Middle School, if funding is available to upgrade the building. The state has extended money for all-day kindergarten to all schools regardless of their poverty status therefore all buildings can now provide all-day Kindergarten.

Mrs. Whitmer shared her reasons to make Sunnyside a 6th Grade Center and move Kindergarten back to their neighborhood schools. The Middle School building will not be ready for 4 to 5 years, if funding is available. Planning and construction will also take time. She feels a 6th Grade Center would provide class electives and create a similar Middle School environment.

At the suggestion of Mrs. Polk, the Principals in attendance introduced themselves to the new board members.

Mr. Callaway, who is a parent of a 5th Grader, asked how to explain to his child the reason he is moving to another building; what is the cost savings; and how does it enhance the student experience. Mrs. Whitmer feels all the students together provides a more mature atmosphere, and could offer extra-curricular activities. Mr. Callaway questioned the original plan of moving Grade 6 to the Middle School, and why the corporation paid a consultant firm to make a recommendation. Mrs. Whitmer stated it would be a time of transition; and there is a benefit to having Kindergarten students attend their neighborhood schools, rather than taking a long bus ride across town each day.

Mr. Pheffer responded to Mrs. Polk about a five-year time frame. Based on the Legislature, it would be November before a referendum could be held. If passed at that time, he estimates late 2020 or early 2021. If referendum is held November 2018 and passes, there would be three to six months for design which brings us to mid- 2019. Construction with students in the building could take a year and a half, so the time frame could be the second semester of the 2020-21 school year.

Mr. Fisher stated if the Legislature passes the bill that allows the Corporation to borrow 2 million dollars to 10 million dollars without objections from the public, we can begin renovations immediately.

Mr. Callaway questioned why a student would be sent to Eastwood if Parker and Riley are closer to their homes. Mrs. Whitmer noted that Parker is overcrowded. Mr. Callaway stated redistricting may need to be considered. He is concerned about moving students. He thought cost savings was the focus and the plan was to close a building, consolidate, and move Grade 6 to the Middle School. Mrs. Whitmer said this would be a temporary bridge until the Middle School upgrades could be made. Mr. Callaway noted the poor condition of the Sunnyside building, determined during recent building evaluations.

Mr. Williamson stated a lot of the issue is the school districts. His family chose to build their home on the south side of town so their children would attend Riley. They loved it there, and would have been upset had their children been moved to a different building. He understands how parents feel and asked if the issue is tied to the article in the newspaper, which stated some parents do not want to send their children to Sunnyside so they choose Agape or Tri High. He feels enrollment could be affected by creating a 6th Grade Center.

Mr. Marcum stated a 6th Grade Center would be marketed as temporary while in the process of remodeling a three-grade Middle School. Mr. Callaway, as a parent, is sold on the Middle School upgrades, but does not understand why we would want to create a 6th Grade Center at Sunnyside. Mr. Pheffer noted we have not stated there would be any cost savings moving 6th Grade to the Middle School and will likely repurpose and continue using the Sunnyside building. Mr. Pheffer stated the reason to move 6th Grade to the Middle School at this time is the outdated electrical system is in need of upgrades. Also, it would improve safety issues and education. Mrs. Bergum explained students could not move from class to class at Sunnyside due to licensing. Teachers cannot just teach one subject. Classes would have to remain self-contained.

Mr. Callaway stated the confusion is not with combining 6th Grade at the Middle School, but moving 6th Grade to Sunnyside. Mrs. Polk feels isolating 6th Graders in one building would provide opportunities. Mrs. Callaway stated if funding did not become available for the Middle School remodel, the 6th Grade Center would be wrong. Space would not allow students to return to their original buildings. Mrs. Whitmer noted research she has read states it is easier for an older child to transition into a new building than for a younger student.

Mr. Fisher noted other issues to discuss if we created a 6th Grade Center. The Focus Classes; the need for an Assistant Principal and /or Counselor; Sunnyside Kindergarten students would have to move away from their own neighborhood; time issues; Special Education issues that involves same age peers; space concerns at Eastwood; technology at the building to handle all lap-tops for testing; and the classroom would be self-contained. He noted there would be benefits to moving Kindergarten back to their own buildings. He explained the growth factor that improved Sunnyside to grade of B would not be considered at the state.

Mr. Callaway asked if demographics would naturally fix themselves on Kindergarten. Mr. Fisher had discussion on that today and explained it was possible, but would have to consider using a modular for class room space at certain schools. Mrs. Whitmer noted since Sunnyside is an older building and with technology challenges, it should be vacated as an elementary. Mr. Fisher stated it could be repurposed for additional space for the Career Center. Mr. Marcum stated as the population of the community gets smaller and population density shifts, we should at some point redistrict to avoid bussing students across districts. Mr. Fisher agreed that will have to be considered at some point and stated special placements are no longer allowed. Mr. Callaway stated perhaps special placements could be addressed with new students rather than current students. Mr. Pheffer stated in the case where too many students were an issue, it may be allowed rather than hire another teacher.

Mrs. McAllister stated consolidation was done at Sunnyside to provide a full- day program. At that time, the vision was to have a Kindergarten Center. Since then it seems not to be a viable plan. She feels it is not healthy to isolate one grade level. Some students benefit from other grade levels being in the same building for instruction. Communication between Teachers is also a benefit when not isolated to one grade level. Mrs. McAllister stated she has fantastic Kindergarten Teachers at Sunnyside. Having a K-3 building has been a welcomed opportunity and the instructional focus has been targeted. She has been able to have family literacy days with over 100 parents attending to read with students for 30 minutes. Facility changes would also have to take place, and there are no faculty restrooms in the building. Teachers need to see what the grades ahead of them are teaching.

Mr. Middleton stated returning Kindergarten to Riley would involve procedure changes. He enjoys having 6th Graders who help with younger students with field trips and leadership. Mr. Middleton noted it is important to do what is best for the students as well as what is best for the staff. He is concerned about building changes necessary if a move takes place, as well as if the funding does not become available.

Mr. Carson stated the long bus ride for students is an issue, but that parents realize that is how things are. Westwood's enrollment includes 30 to 40% of first graders coming from private schools. He would love to have Kindergarten students back and also enjoys having 6th Graders in his building. Mr. Carson invited everyone to attend STEM on Fridays to see how 6th and 2nd Graders work together. Lots of flexible grouping and co-teaching takes place at Westwood while they meet the needs of students in preparing them for Middle School. Mr. Carson stated his teachers are phenomenal. His students show tremendous growth and he does not know that moving 6th Grade and bringing Kindergarten back is a right or wrong solution.

Mr. White stated every room at Eastwood is being utilized. Music classes meet in the gym two days a week. There are 1st-2nd-3rd Grades at Sunnyside, plus possibly 3 sections of Kindergarten, 3 classes of Pre-School, 3 Life Skills/Special Education classes; there is no space for 6 more sections coming in. He noted Pre-school has been bounced around a lot, which is a lot for the teachers as well. The vision is not clear. We have short choppy changes and people question what is going on with many decisions being made. This is difficult for staff, community, and parents. It would help to know the end goal and stick with the plan. Mr. Callaway agreed with Mr. White.

Mrs. Wilson agrees there are short decisions, and what appears to be knee-jerk reactions. If the house bill at the legislature does not go through, and the referendum fails, maybe this is the direction to look at. She feels there are good people in places where needed.

Mr. Marcum noted all seem to agree with combining grades 6th through 8th at the Middle School is a good plan.

Mrs. Whitmer asked if there is an advantage to consolidate Kindergarten students or 6th Graders. Which level is more significantly affected by being removed from their neighborhood schools. Mrs. Wilson noted we are looking at a 6th through 8th grades at the Middle School and Kindergarten returning to their neighborhood schools. She stated Sunnyside has a great staff and they are getting the job done. Mr. White stated we would be asking 6th Grade Teachers to move for a few years then make another move. Right now we have 6th Grade Teachers already aligned with Math curriculum and Textbook Adoption. Shifting creates a speed bump. Mr. Callaway noted we need to sell the community on a plan and we need a vision. He suggested to allow Mr. Pheffer continue meeting with contractors and investors to determine what is feasible. Then create the committee of community, parents, leaders, teachers, and principals. Be transparent, get their input get their concerns and determine a plan. Then decide whether to move forward or not. Mr. Pheffer stated that is precisely what we are doing. The March 13th Board meeting will include a summary report from Mr. Pheffer's meetings with the experts.

Mr. Marcum asked how difficult it would be when redistricting becomes necessary with population shifting as it is. Mr. Carson stated Westwood has a total of 240 students down from 275. A large portion of Westwood enrollment came from choice students. His Teachers are doing a great job, scores are up, and Westwood is able to attract students. Mr. Carson feels without redistricting in the future, enrollment will continue to decline. Mr. Marcum noted transportation is a challenge, and a lot of reasons to redistrict when the time is right. Moving 6th Grade to the Middle School and class sizes that are fair to each teacher and building, redistricting would be necessary. Mr. Carson suggested all changes should be bundled together. Mr. Callaway suggested some elementary schools should consider rebranding or name changes to eliminate stigmas.

Dr. Blake stated another consideration with Special Education is the Life Skills classes if moving 6th Graders into a Center. Enrollment in those classes grows as students get older. Student's needs also change. It would be easier to keep Kindergarten in general education. We also need to consider this may create a space issue for Life Skills as well as 6th graders in that class. She does not know if it is even possible with all the moving that would have to be done, and if the move would still be necessary if another year passes.

Mrs. Whitmer felt discussion has helped and consensus she is hearing is to keep things as they are.

Mr. Fisher asked the Board to consider if we want to move 3rd Grade from Sunnyside to Eastwood to resolve the testing issue by having only 18 students in that class. DOE will not count the growth factor. He suggests Mrs. McAllister and Mr. White discuss the issue and bring recommendation to the board.

The meeting adjourned at 7:05P.M.

President

Secretary

Vice President

LMC
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