

E. Fitzgerald Comments re: MPV at 9/7/16 Meeting

Acknowledge process, input from variety of stakeholders; and “arduous” process; reminder that the District “accelerated” a needed review of strategic alternatives with an emphasis on elementary school consolidation options

There is clearly an incredible amount of pride in our schools, value placed on the notion of a “neighborhood” elementary facility, financial support, and interest in a future where schools play an integral part in attracting and retaining homeowners and community members.

Despite strong individual opinions on either side of a consolidation strategy, this discussion has not been a “no brainer”.

I would also like to ask, at the onset, that my comments stand in their entirety.

From the start, I believed that there are two visions that drive change...one being dissatisfaction with the current situation (including a real or perceived crisis) and the other being a compelling aspirational vision and goal that unifies and rallies the community and needed resources...

I don't believe that either exist at this moment in time for our school district. However...

Guiding principles in my consideration of alternatives:

- A belief that structure should follow strategy (whether it is organizational structure, process, or physical space)
- ... the certainty that we, as the SB school system, are not currently “broken”
- ... and the equal certainty that change is inevitable
- That a lot of smart, student-minded people have been looking with us and providing feedback
- That, like the Orson Well's wine commercials of the '70's, which promised to sell “no wine before it's time”, the timing and timeframe for decisions like these are also part of an overall strategy
- And that part of the job we do along with administration, is to recognize symptoms or trigger (pivot) points that might necessitate change well in advance of a crisis or failure to deliver on our district's ends policy; in effect to mitigate risk by anticipating emerging needs
- And lastly, for our students and staff... to provide a safe and secure environment in which to teach and learn, a program of continuous improvement in preparing students for their next steps, an organizational structure with enough flexibility and nimbleness to absorb some variability in operations (whether it be in enrollment, tuition students, state or Federal mandates, funding requirements, security improvements, etc.) and all at a cost the community will support

What I did not consider in my thought process was the City's priorities which impact the same SB taxpayers, community, and potentially space or any third party interest in any of the current school locations. Our schools however, can't operate in a vacuum when it comes to financial considerations and continuing to deliver on the promise of a quality education for all our students.

The process has identified some emerging needs in how we deliver our services in SB, as well as an acceleration of potential "trigger points" which might require a different approach. New information about enrollment, equity, and noise concerns are early indicators of the need to evaluate the learning environment at Chamberlin. The voters will have a ballot item before them in November regarding TIF improvements, which will change the landscape at Rick Marcotte Central. I think we have seen and can anticipate that new information may shape our view of the environment in which we currently provide education to SB children. I believe we need to prepare for change.

These are particularly dynamic times. The community has historically embraced the small-school configuration. As a Board and as Administrators, we are often asked to keep class sizes small, to add staff, to provide enhanced programming, and respond to social service gaps, all while keeping tax increases at a minimum.

We are struggling with the downward pressure to reduce costs and mitigate risks with the upward pressure of maintaining and improving student outcomes in a global environment. Strong educational foundations are often cited by experts.

There are a host of solutions which might address or resolve any individual issue which has been identified through this process, such as redistricting, more modest space modifications, moving the 5th grade to the middle school, etc. However, I am concerned that a series of "one-off" decisions do not represent a cohesive strategy moving forward and have a higher potential for compromising "in total" the system we have now.

Though I can justify interim consolidation options such as #3, I believe it is only "interim" and believe we, as a District, should commit to a unification strategy for all our elementary students, which preserves and improves programming for all students, provides some potential to manage costs over time with scale and efficiencies, and acknowledges the value of increasingly limited time for collaboration, information sharing, and peer adult and student mentoring/modeling opportunities for staff .

Though my comments are not comprehensive of my thought process and I readily acknowledge that my opinion of where the District should end up has flip-flopped many times, I do believe we need to plan ahead though I am not persuaded that, specific to our prior discussion on the November timeframe for action, we have enough information to justify a bond proposal anytime in the near future.

Potential next steps:

Monitor the identified “trigger points”

Plan to consolidate with a tactical level of detail such as site selection, vetting, transportation, staffing, programming, funding alternatives etc. – anticipating a time horizon of 5-10 years with flexibility to accelerate or decelerate as warranted

Invest only appropriately in elementary schools with this longer-term vision

Justify investments in the middle and high school to the community as shorter-term priorities

Provide a “phased” program of investments to the community