

DISCUSSION DRAFT

LAWRENCE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Recommendation:

The District must develop a sustainable vision for the future of Lawrence elementary schools. We recommend that the Board of Education carefully consider all information presented in this report prior to making any decisions about consolidation now or in the future. It is imperative that any decision reached meet the needs of elementary students in the District while adhering to a logical set of evaluation criteria.

Introduction:

The working group members represented in this report have devoted the past 6 months to research that would allow us to meet our charge, which was to consolidate 6 elementary schools into 3 or 4 schools. This research has been extremely illuminating, and our group has strived to focus on what could be gained through consolidation more so than what would be lost. However, given the recently revealed sentiments of a majority of Board members who do not intend to support this charge, we decline to recommend any particular facility for consolidation or closure. Instead, we present the following: 1) a brief discussion of our views of consolidation benefits; 2) our analysis of the evaluation criteria we feel must guide current and future decision-making; 3) a summary of current needs/deficiencies in our elementary facilities with respect to programming and services; 4) some preliminary thoughts on what consolidation might look like; 4) a discussion and analysis of what we feel are key issues for the Board to address immediately; and 5) our conclusions and final reflections on this process. Appendix A contains our analysis of the consolidation scenarios RSP presented at our 2/13/2012 meeting.

The Case for Consolidation

The initial charge to consolidate came from the desire to maximize the use of district resources, financial and otherwise. While the total amount of money saved from consolidation varies from scenario to scenario, most proposals do offer some modicum of savings, savings which would accrue further over time. We feel that these savings can be used to build greater equity in programming and staffing, particularly in the lower-SES populated schools. If consolidation can be used to add additional staff or programming, this has a cumulative benefit in our schools. Two additional staff members, for example, continue to be of benefit long after the first year that monies are found to fund them.

We are not opposed to the idea that there may be other ways to close these funding gaps, but we also feel that consolidation to create slightly larger schools has other non-financial benefits. Some of those benefits are:

- Greater opportunities for staff interaction, in same-sections and otherwise. With three sections of a grade, these staff members can work together to create innovative programming, and also have more options in helping children have more one-on-one time with staff.
- Less windshield time for staff. Greater student populations should increase full-time staff for nurses, social workers, mental health professionals, and specials. Though increasing school

population size does not mean that students will have more music, art, or PE, it does mean that those staff members will be available for scheduling and other needs instead of putting in time driving from school to school. It will also increase the amount of involvement this staff will be able to have in their school, as they will not have to spread that involvement between 2-3 institutions.

- Greater opportunities for differentiated learning. Differentiated (leveled) learning is already happening in our schools. However, when there are multiple sections of a single grade, how staff are used can change. A good example of this is occurring currently at Kennedy. The three second grade teachers split their students into differentiated learning groups for reading and math so that one teacher prepares a lesson for the higher-need children, the second for “middle” need children, and the third for accelerated learners. In this scenario, the students win because they spend more time learning at their level, and the teachers win because they can better focus their learning objectives to a specific tier of learning.
- Improvements to ESL delivery. The ELL population of Central and East Lawrence is growing—and there should be expanded sites to accommodate that need. Additional schools offering ESL spreads the benefits to new populations, and alleviates the “percentage problem” of current ESL sites.

Evaluation Criteria:

The 2010-2011 Lawrence Elementary School Facility Vision Task Force promoted a set of 12 criteria it felt were most important to guiding the future of Lawrence elementary school facilities. In light of our working group’s efforts, we present those criteria with our comments here, plus 3 other criteria we see as critical to guiding your decisions. We note also that some criteria may conflict with others, in which case weighting and balancing becomes necessary.

- 1) *Fully utilize elementary school locations before constructing new schools at new locations.*

It became clear during our group’s work that a new elementary facility to allow possible consolidation of east Lawrence elementary schools is quite controversial. Sufficient land to make such a facility work at a midway point, to accommodate walking and bicycling, may or may not be available. Moreover, many members of the group fear that the bond issue would be much less likely to pass if people perceived that the District was not adhering to this criterion.

However, it is worth noting that state-of-the-art facilities, whether new or heavily renovated, bring various benefits to the community. They are a positive asset for new businesses and investors who would consider our community for economic growth. They communicate to the resident community that Lawrence values their education, and will invest in them. Such facilities, built to be ecologically sound, technologically modern, and flexible, also optimize our opportunities for long-term learning in a knowledge economy.

- 2) *Plan for a capacity of approximately 300-500 students at all elementary schools.*

Closing no elementary schools will keep 4 of the 6 schools we considered for consolidation, plus Woodlawn School, from having 300 or more students. The 2 schools that would be at or above

this 300 number are those that have ESL cluster sites. Without the clusters, they, too, would drop below 300 students. As discussed above, because the District deploys services and programs based on enrollment, we fear that these smaller schools will continue to go without the needed levels of these essential services and programs. Consolidation and/or boundary adjustments could help the smaller schools grow in enrollment.

3) *Plan for equity in terms of learning environments across the District.*

Through this process we have learned that different people clearly have different ideas of what constitutes an equitable learning environment. Small schools may have smaller playgrounds, combined gymnasiums and cafeterias, and in some cases, smaller classrooms. The point at which those conditions begin to feel inequitable may be a function of the overall condition of the building, including unmet maintenance needs, overcrowding, and so on. When faced with the closure of their building, it appears that most people would prefer to keep their current facilities, despite their perceived inequities. For these reasons, application of this criterion is particularly difficult.

4) *Plan for all-day Kindergarten at all schools in the future.*

We agree that this is a very important criterion for the Board to apply to its decision-making. All Lawrence schools deserve and would benefit from all-day Kindergarten, and it should be offered to the remaining schools immediately.

5) *Eliminate all portables at elementary schools.*

Portable classrooms are intended for temporary use, but in some cases have become near permanent fixtures in our elementary facilities. The District must plan to remedy this situation as soon as possible, keeping in mind the future likelihood of expansion or closure of particular facilities in so doing. Boundary adjustments could immediately eliminate the need for some portables.

6) *Plan for flexibility to accommodate changes to programs in the future.*

As described above, we feel that District ESL programming requires planned change for both the short and long-term. This should include plans to distribute ESL services more widely in the elementary schools. The District should also plan for expansion of the Early Childhood Program in order to accommodate unmet need. Since affordable, all-day preschool options are very limited in Lawrence, an expanded Early Childhood Program would likely draw more families who would pay for that program, thus creating a critical revenue stream and diversifying its socioeconomic makeup.

7) *Plan for investment to address aging facilities.*

The deferred maintenance needs of our elementary facilities are huge. Yet, many of these facilities are structurally sound and capable of functioning well as strong learning environments far into the future. Any investments made should be with maximum flexibility in mind.

- 8) *Deploy services in a differentiated manner such that all schools receive the services and programs they need.*

Equity was a key and overarching concern for our working group members. We fully support the District's "Accepted Standards for Elementary Schools," and appreciate that the District is developing a new rubric for allocating services. We recommend this rubric takes into account the special needs at our low-SES schools while not removing services from the larger schools where they are also needed. We remain skeptical about the likelihood of providing all needed services if all facilities are kept open.

- 9) *Strive to create and maintain schools that embody such a community that every school is a community school.*

A school community is largely a function of the families and teachers who make up that school. Committing to a long-term vision for our elementary facilities will allow this sense of community to thrive; recent fears of closure have perhaps had the opposite effect. Still, additional resources such as Parent Involvement Facilitators are essential elements to the success of these efforts.

- 10) *Ensure that as many children as possible are able to walk or bike to school if they choose to do so.*

Walkability is a tremendously important criterion for two main reasons. First, it promotes a healthy, active lifestyle that research has shown contributes to academic success.¹ Second, it is critical for families who rely on their child's ability to walk to school; these families do not have other reliable transportation options or have an employment schedule that does not enable them to transport their student to or from school. Any future closures must account for impacts on walkability, particularly among low-SES families. Locating schools at the center of their attendance areas is a huge aspect of this effort.

- 11) *Incorporate best practices that research suggests have a greater impact on student achievement than school and class size.*

In our estimation, SLOP is one such best practice. While our larger group disagreed on the relative benefits and harms of class size, we did agree that ESL-trained teachers are better equipped to meet the needs of all learners, perhaps especially other at-risk learners. It is for this reason that we strongly encourage dispersal of ESL to more elementary facilities.

- 12) *Plan to provide at a minimum 720 square foot classrooms for grades 1-5 and 900 square feet for Kindergarten at existing schools.*

This criterion seems to reflect some of the same concern for equitable facilities expressed in Criterion 3. While new construction along these dimensions makes sense, it would seem

¹Active Living Research. Summer 2009. Active Education: Physical Education, Physical Activity and Academic Performance. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research Brief. Available online at: http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/Active_Ed_Summer2009.pdf

unreasonable to expect that renovation to expand the size of existing classrooms is cost-effective. Moreover, some of the District's information on classroom sizes may be incorrect.

13) Ensure facility uses are compatible with and beneficial to neighborhoods.

We recommend that the District establish an ongoing relationship with the City so that efforts can be streamlined and each entity can be aware of the other's plans. While a neighborhood would undoubtedly view the closure of its school as a tremendous loss, the District and the City could and should work together to ensure future facility uses that are compatible with and beneficial to neighborhoods. Where clearly delineated neighborhoods in Lawrence exist, any movement of students resulting from closure or consolidation should strive to ensure that children in these neighborhoods can attend the same school. Similarly, any plans to expand existing facilities should consider neighborhood impacts.

14) Address traffic impacts and overall mobility in any future closure/consolidation efforts.

Expanding our existing school facilities, whether due to closure/consolidation or increased enrollments, necessitates careful study of the traffic impacts of those expansions. Such study should be completed by traffic engineers on the front end of any project, in order to calculate more accurately the traffic capacities of expanded school sites. In addition, and related to walkability, the District should consider mobility impacts of any future closures/consolidations, as explained further in the next criterion.

15) Minimize negative impacts on low-SES and other at-risk students.

The district's low-SES students deserve special consideration in any decision-making. As described above, we have particular concern that District resources will be insufficient to meet the needs of these students in their existing schools absent consolidation. In reviewing the scenarios discussed in the next section, our group was especially sensitive to outcomes that appeared to place a higher burden on low-SES students. We did not all agree that a larger school would be either helpful or harmful to these students. However, we did agree that protecting walkability was key to ensuring many students' success.

Current Needs at Our Elementary Schools

Independent of the deferred maintenance needs of our elementary facilities, which the District has carefully analyzed, the smaller schools in Lawrence currently lack services and programs that would facilitate the best possible success of their students. In particular, resources for nurses, counselors, social workers and librarians are inadequate. As one example, none of the 6 schools involved in our working group charge has a school counselor at greater than a half-time appointment, despite these schools having 46% of the low-SES elementary population in the District. Health care staffing is similarly limited. A recent study of school nurses in urban schools² found that with a school nurse in the building, teachers spent about 9 minutes a day on health-related issues for their students. Teachers without

² Baisch, M.J.,Lundeen. S.P. and M.K. Murphy. (2011.) Evidence-based research on the value of school nurses in an urban school system. *Journal of School Health* 81(2): 74-80.

adequate nursing resources in their buildings spent 40 minutes a day on these issues. The takeaway point here is that adequate provision of necessary resources clearly affects what happens in the classroom. In addition, low-SES students and families tend to utilize health and social work staff differently and to a greater degree, and in ways that strengthen the case for full-time staff in these fields.

While some members of our working group have pointed to other research that concludes small schools are best for children of low socio-economic status (SES), we presume such findings apply to facilities that are able to offer those children all the resources they need. Indeed, the 2010-2011 Task Force's Research subcommittee found that the research on school and class size is inconclusive, and that other factors, such as quality teaching, are more important contributors to student achievement. It is for these reasons that the group members supporting this report agree that a larger school with all needed services and strong teaching and programming is likely to benefit students more than a small school without those services. Larger schools also permit differentiated services in the classroom and other opportunities, such as clubs and other extra-curriculars, which enhance student experiences.

What Consolidation Might Look Like

It is a common misconception that consolidation would necessarily mean huge classroom populations. Our charge was to create a plan with a 3-5 year timeframe in mind, and a bond to support that plan. Simply, closure of one school would not occur without building modern, sustainable space in another/other schools through renovation supported with a bond.

Data we have received through this process is that a three-section school would provide large enough populations for full-time services such as nurses and social workers. So, three sections, with roughly 20 students per class and 3 classes per grade, would be approximately 360 students.

A 4/3 section school might have 4 sections of grades K-2 to provide for smaller class sizes in these grades (which is generally desirable). There would be larger class sizes in 3rd-5th grades. With 18/19 students per class K-2nd and an average of 25 students per class 3rd-5th, 21 classrooms would be needed for a capacity of 450. At 90% full, this would translate to 405 students.

The general consensus of the group was that student populations higher than 450 were generally undesirable—there was no greater financial benefit gained, and possible detriment to school sizes that large.

Other Key Issues Discovered Through the Process:

Through our research, we have identified 3 key issues that we feel the Board must address as soon as possible. These are the issues that we believe to be at the crux of the long-term future of our elementary facilities.

Deferred Maintenance and Other Facility Needs: The list of deferred maintenance costs for Lawrence elementary schools is staggering. A successful bond issue is clearly needed to address these needs.

However, we urge the Board to move forward with a vision as to the long-term viability of school facilities prior to investing large sums of money in them. In other words, repairing or expanding a facility that may face closure in coming years is not desirable. Similarly, it makes sense to consider expansion of facilities deemed most likely to accommodate increasing numbers of future students resulting from growth, boundary changes, and/or future closures. We have an opportunity to go “beyond the band-aid” in this bond. We have can be truly proactive in further creating learning communities that are sustainable, technologically modern, and invest in the long-term success of our children.

ESL: The District’s programming choice for delivering English as a Second Language (ESL) services in our District, most notably, the cluster model, worked well when it was first established and numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) in Lawrence were somewhat small. Over time, however, large, ongoing increases in the number of ELLs have led to the creation of an additional cluster site and two new neighborhood ESL sites. *It is essential that the District develop a short and long-term plan for more widely distributed ESL services.* We request that you read the specific ESL-related research the Pinckney School group shared in its January 2 revised proposal. The following are critical findings we feel should guide the District’s planning efforts.

- 1) While ESL clusters are financially advantageous for schools in which there are not adequate ELLs, there is no empirical academic benefit to the cluster model. According to District Administration, ESL students in the cluster sites do not perform better on achievement tests than students in the neighborhood sites.
- 2) Similarly, there is no research to suggest a minimum critical mass of ELLs needed to offer successful ESL services. Some of the proposals generated by the working group aimed for approximately 60 ELLs in new clusters, similar to current programs. But, it may be possible and, in fact, desirable to start new neighborhood ESL sites with smaller numbers than that, provided those schools have sufficient (1-3) years advance notice to prepare for the transition.
- 3) Teachers trained in SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) utilize strategies that will benefit all learners, not just ELLs. For this reason, extending ESL into more neighborhood schools should prove academically advantageous in a broad sense.
- 4) At-risk learners, particularly those who begin elementary school with a language deficit linked to their SES, could realize especially important benefits from SIOP-based instruction in their schools.
- 5) Currently, 17% of District students eligible for ESL services at a cluster site decline those services. Key research tracking those students over time has shown that they are at a tremendous later risk for low academic performance.³ Providing ESL services in neighborhood schools would almost certainly lower or even eliminate the number of families who decline those services, and would thereby support one of seven goals the

³ Thomas, W.P. & Collier, V.P. (2002). *A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students’ Long-Term Academic Achievement*. UC Berkeley: Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE). Available online at: http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/llaa/1.1_final.html.

District has stated for its ESL program: "All students who are eligible for ESL services will be served."

- 6) Demographic trends suggest an ongoing increase in the number of ELLs in Lawrence schools. Since 2000, Lawrence's elementary school ESL population has grown 483%. It follows that this number will only continue to grow. Even now, these increases are resulting in shuffling of students between Cordley and Hillcrest schools, both of which are facing capacity constraints. In addition, it leads to undesirable percentages of ELL/non-ELL students that motivates these schools to accept non-ELL preference transfers to attempt a better balance. This is especially problematic in Hillcrest, where capacity is reported at 114% though only roughly 40% of Hillcrest students reside in their catchment area.
- 7) Cluster program transportation costs for the 2010-2011 school year totaled \$216,681.41 (Cordley \$32,782.80 and Hillcrest \$183,898.61). The creation of additional neighborhood ESL sites would certainly become a more efficient solution to delivery of those services in the long term. As transportation costs continue to increase with the price of fuel, the current practice of busing of ELLs to cluster sites will be neither sustainable nor environmentally sound. At some point in the near future, it will be more sensible to make this investment in our elementary staff, who are a renewable resource.
- 8) The addition of services in other schools does not diminish the programmatic benefits of current ESL cluster sites. Currently, the percentage to ELLs/non-ELLs in Hillcrest is too high. Creating additional ESL sites is a good way to accommodate what will only continue to be a growing need.

Boundary Adjustments: Some elementary school facilities in Lawrence, including several that are not part of our working group's analysis, are functioning beyond their buildings' capacities. As noted, the District has responded with use of portable classroom units in many of these instances, but this solution is hardly sustainable. *In order to even out enrollment District wide, freeing up space in some facilities, while filling seats in those schools with extra capacity, the School Board must begin an immediate analysis of boundary shifts that could be implemented as early as Fall 2012.* Though it can evoke feelings from the community, it is a normal part of school district management in a multi-school district, as population densities and demographics shift. This is realistic, as many of our over-populated schools are neighbored by below-capacity schools.

Conclusions:

While we all expected this process to be challenging when we accepted our charge, none of us anticipated just how difficult our work would become. We conclude with two sets of observations and recommendations related to our findings and our working group process.

First, our sub-group is concerned that the issue of school closure/consolidation will not simply go away if we do nothing now. The school district has endured significant cuts in state funding over the past five years. While it seems as if the cuts to education at the state level are leveling out, this still leaves us with a per-student funding rate that is lower than that of a decade ago. District elementary schools have taken the brunt of the cuts, with savings realized through raising class sizes and stripping down essential

services. We feel the District's long-range vision for our elementary facilities must definitively answer the question of how many facilities we can support while offering the best possible education for our students. This is a 20-year long debate in our community, and it is time to resolve it.

Similarly, basing recommendations on a highly uncertain school funding environment at the state level requires the utmost caution. Resting the hopes of this community, which cares deeply about principles of equity, on the Governor's current proposal to increase the Local Option Budget seems to us to be both short-sighted and contradictory.

We understand that consolidation can be an uncomfortable, if unpopular concept. Certainly, many of our own group came fully prepared to eschew the idea. However, as we learned more, it became apparent that there could be benefits to consolidation if done in a thoughtful and well-planned manner. We do value the benefits of neighborhood schools—but not if that means programmatic sacrifices that lead to inequity among the district's learners.

Our *second* set of observations and recommendations relates to the difficult process our working group has experienced. We admit to a sense of frustration that some of our difficulties could have been avoided had the Board adjusted our charge earlier. *For future use of citizen volunteers in working groups, it is absolutely essential that you, as a Board, support the charge of those volunteers.* We acknowledge that new information may have changed your minds about our charge during our working group deliberations. However, it is simply unfair to allow a group of volunteers to continue toiling at an immensely difficult task when a majority no longer sees that task as valid. Citizen participation in planning processes of all kinds is a cornerstone of our democracy. However, citizens who come to feel manipulated or marginalized in those processes are much less likely to offer their time and energy in the future.

In closing, we recognize that any frustration we have experienced as individuals is well worth it if it is part of a process that moves us forward as a District. We agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Doll's comments at our February 13 meeting: we can and we must do better with our Lawrence elementary schools. We urge the School Board to consider how to accomplish this, in light of the extensive research and criteria this working group has presented. In so doing, we are hopeful that the necessary, sustainable, and long-range vision for Lawrence elementary schools will emerge.