



"The Leaders of Tomorrow Attend Fair Lawn Schools Today"

**Fair Lawn School District  
Dr. Ernest Palestis  
Interim Superintendent of Schools**

**Recommendations for Facility Expansion  
August 2017**

**General Background:**

During the 2016 – 2017 school year, significant evidence indicated that the District would continue to experience enrollment growth and the resultant increase in class sizes.

The evidence was:

- Actual classroom enrollment data
- Demographic projections
- Input from parents and staff
- Housing market sales trends
- Functional capacity analysis

The enrollment growth issues are:

- Enrollment currently exceeds functional capacity at grades K - 5 elementary schools and is projected to exceed functional capacity at grades 6 - 8 middle schools
- Large class sizes at several elementary schools

The Interim Superintendent recommended several steps to the Board to address these issues:

- Employing general education paraprofessionals
- Conducting a second demographic study
- Reviewing master schedules with special education administration and building administration
- Adopting Soft Borders Policy
- Consulting with architect on construction, expansion and renovation options

- Consulting with bond counsel and financial advisors on financing options

## **Construction / Expansion / Renovation Options**

During the 2016 – 2017 school year, the District worked with the architect to explore construction / expansion / renovation options for Edison School, all existing elementary schools and both middle schools.

Based upon the investigation by the architect and internal analysis by Central Office staff, it became clear that construction / expansion / renovation at both middle schools was the only viable option to address the enrollment growth issues at both the elementary and middle school levels.

The use of the middle school option became the primary solution choice because:

- All options at the elementary schools, including Edison, were cost prohibitive or impossible to accomplish based on the existing physical plants (please refer to presentation dated May 11, 2017)
- Construction at the elementary schools would not alleviate enrollment growth issues at the middle school level
- Both Thomas Jefferson and Memorial could be expanded
- Movement of grade 5 students to middle schools would increase the elementary schools' classroom space available for anticipated grades K - 4 enrollment growth
- Many of our elementary schools' core facilities have already reached maximum capacity

The architect, bond counsel and financial advisors also recommended incorporating other projects from the District's Long Range Facilities Plan into this major construction project to reduce costs of those projects by utilizing Debt Service Aid available through the State of New Jersey.

These additional district-wide projects were identified for possible inclusion:

- Elevators at Forrest and Warren Point Elementary Schools
- Air conditioning of auditorium at Fair Lawn High School
- Roof replacement at Memorial Middle School
- Address other critical items contained within the District's Long Range Facilities Plan

## **Instructional / Organizational Options**

During the 2016 – 2017 school year, the Board and Central Office examined two instructional / organizational options for the middle schools. These included:

- Grades 5 - 8 configuration at each middle school
- Grades 5 - 6 configuration at one middle school and a 7 - 8 configuration at the other middle school

Both Central Office and the Board of Education reached the conclusion that a 5 – 6 model at Memorial and a 7 – 8 model at Thomas Jefferson were preferred. The rationale for this included:

- Opportunities to focus on developmental needs of grades 5 – 6 students in their own environment
- Opportunities to focus on developmental needs of grades 7 – 8 students in their own environment
- Provision of uniform curriculum opportunities district wide
- Unification of special education options

The Central Office staff continued to investigate the feasibility of a grades 5 – 6 / grades 7 – 8 program at the middle schools. This investigation included:

- Curriculum implications
- Transportation implications
- Staffing implications

In order to ensure that the grades 5 - 6 / grades 7 - 8 model would work, the Central Office staff contacted other districts and retained a contract with a consultant, Ross Haber & Associates.

## **Continued Research Findings**

Further exploration revealed that transportation costs far exceeded the preliminary projections. Whereas the initial research indicated an annual transportation cost of \$200,000 per year, newly acquired transportation software provided a more accurate cost projection. The more accurate projection was a cost in excess of \$400,000.

In the opinion of our consultant, when cohort survival rates and contracted service costs are considered, transportation costs would further increase to \$750,000.

### **Impact of Increased Transportation Costs**

Although, Central Office continued to support the curriculum and social / emotional gains that the grades 5 – 6 / grades 7- 8 model would provide to the students of Fair Lawn, the District cannot afford to spend \$750,000 per year on transportation. The impact would devastate all future budgets, and the taxpayers of our community:

- The \$750,000 transportation cost would grow every year as contracted service costs increase and the number of students increase
- The \$750,000 transportation cost would make it impossible to keep the annual budget increases within the allowable 2%
- As the District enrollment grows, the District would not have the necessary funds to employ new teachers and other necessary staff

### **Recommendation of the Interim Superintendent**

Based upon the new information about transportation costs, it is the recommendation of the Interim Superintendent that the District abandon the grades 5 - 6 / grades 7 - 8 model and pursue a grades 5 – 8 model. The rationale for the recommendation of the grades 5 – 8 model is that the model would:

- Eliminate \$750,000 transportation costs per year
- Eliminate the need to transport students across town
- Maintain neighborhood middle schools
- Maintain or reduce current class sizes while accommodating increased enrollment at all elementary schools as well as both middle schools by adding classrooms to both middle schools

### **Instructional / Organizational Options**

The recommendation to establish a grades 5 - 8 structure at each middle school can be implemented in several ways. One structure is to maintain the elementary school model of a self-contained classroom. However, another possible structure would preserve some of the advantages of the 5 - 6 and 7 - 8 model. To preserve these advantages the structure would need to:

- House the grades 5 and 6 students in their own section of each building, as much as possible
- Institute a “house” system and middle school “teams”

### **What is a Middle School House?**

Many middle schools in the United States feature a house system when students of mixed grade levels occupy the same building. A middle school house would:

- Place grades 5 and 6 students in one house and 7 and 8 students in another.
- Each house would be led by an administrator. The District might need to employ one new assistant principal at each middle school depending on actual enrollment.
- The building principal would provide general oversight of the middle school, much like the high school principal does.
- Each house functions much like a “school within a school.”

The “house” system enhances individualization of instruction and provides greater attention to the social and emotional needs of middle school students through the use of the “team” concept.

### **What is a middle school team?**

The use of teams on the middle school level is a best practice that is supported by the National Middle School Association.

A middle school team takes the “House” concept and further enhances it by placing students on a team with a dedicated group of teachers and other staff. Typically, the team members would have:

- Weekly staff team meetings to discuss individual student needs
- Weekly staff team meetings with building experts such as nurse, guidance, assistant principal, principal, child study team, 504 team
- Weekly student advisory sessions - an adult advisor meets with a group of students to provide academic and social-emotional mentorship and support. These sessions create a sense of “connectedness” and belonging for students at a time when students often feel alienated and disconnected from peers and adults. School connectedness is critical for middle schoolers because it is linked to higher grades, higher test scores, and lower dropout rates.

## **Overall Conclusion**

The Interim Superintendent of Schools fully supported the concept of placing grades 5 and 6 students at one middle school and grades 7 and 8 students at the other middle school.

However, it is impossible, and would be irresponsible; to ignore the transportation costs needed to sustain that concept.

By following the 5 - 8 model at both Memorial and Thomas Jefferson, the District will avoid devastating transportation costs. At the same time, it is possible to enhance the educational program by means of the structure within each school building. A carefully developed survey has been sent to over 40 other school districts that have the grades 5-8 school configuration.

The survey results will be used to ascertain best practices in structuring a grades 5-8 educational program and in facilitating the transition for 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. We are in the process of developing a survey that will be sent to current and future grade 5 parents and current staff concerning the educational structure for the grade 5 students as we continue this process of planning our facilities expansion.

The Interim Superintendent's recommendation is that we create a 5 - 8 middle school at Memorial and a 5 - 8 middle school at Thomas Jefferson.

## **Cost to Taxpayers**

Administration will continue to work with the Board's Architect, Financial Advisors and Bond Counsel to identify the facilities needs and to pursue Debt Service Aid available through the State of New Jersey. The goal of Administration is to minimize impact to the taxpayers of Fair Lawn while providing the best education possible to the students of Fair Lawn. Financial Advisors will continue to monitor the bond market and update estimates as we move closer to the bond sale date.