

Bethlehem Township School District

To address the questions and concerns from our Town Hall Meeting last week we created a document outlining answers to issues raised during the videoconference.

Q1: You mentioned approximately \$180,000 in savings? Where is that money being saved?

- Personnel salaries and benefits - we can't share specifics pertaining to personnel matters. Moving 6th grade to Conley School is a much more efficient use of staff based on teacher certifications.
- Transportation saving due to one less bus needed to run at Hoppock (approximately \$25,000)

Q2: Can both buildings be on the same time schedule?

- No - Transportation needs to run with our two-tiered structure (one at 7:30am one at 8:30am) to maintain our current transportation costs. One larger run of 9 -10 busses is less efficient and costlier.

Q3: Why aren't we consolidating or merging with another school district?

- There have been many discussions over the past several years regarding consolidating schools and districts in the county, particularly with our North Hunterdon-Voorhees sending districts.
- We have been keeping these dialogues open and will continue to investigate options with other schools including a consolidation study that was to begin March 16th but was postponed due to the pandemic.
- This process takes a lot of planning time and any action of this type would require both Boards of Education from school districts to meet and agree on the consolidation.
- Staffing considerations from both districts also needs to be considered and this process typically takes several years to come to an agreement.

Q4: Doesn't the district have money in reserve?

- Any surplus funds that go in a capital reserve or maintenance reserve account must be used to implement the capital projects in the long range facilities plan.

Q5: If the 6th grade is moved to Conley, won't that mean students will be missing out on the different middle school experiences like clubs, the Annual Middle School Play, and Sports?

- Clubs will be offered in both buildings as we do currently and we can expand the club offerings to our 5th/6th grade students. Many additional clubs have been added to Conley School over the past few years and we will continue that trend as long as we have student interest.
- The Annual Play would also likely include 5th grade considering the declining enrollment/participation. The Director would:
 - Schedule scenes and parts at different times to address the different school times.
 - Practices have been on nights and weekends over the past several years.
 - This will ensure the tradition of the Annual Play will continue and include more students.
- Sports will be offered to our 6th graders and busses will be available for practices and games.
 - Soccer and Cross Country practices are at Heritage Park.
 - Basketball and Volleyball are in the Hoppock/Conley Gyms.

- Baseball and Softball are at Heritage Park.
- *Note - we may need to continue offering Sports to 5th grade due to declining enrollment/participation.
- Scheduling and bussing will look different for home/away games but is manageable for our student athletes.

Q6: The middle school provides the students with more freedoms and growth - independence. How will that be able to happen if they are at the elementary school?

- Ms. Jane Smith, Conley Principal, will schedule students in the 5th/6th grade wing to facilitate independence and freedom.
- Classes will be departmentalized (changing rooms and teachers).
- Although we don't currently have lockers in Conley the plan is to install them in the future.
- We want to make it special for our older students and will find ways to make it special along with additional responsibilities and some "perks" for being in the highest grades in the elementary school.

Q7: What will happen to the building if Hoppock School closes?

- We can partner with the Township and use the building for offices and possible revenue producing rentals. Examples could be private schools, scouts, athletics, or other organizations that could use the facilities.
- There are no plans to sell the building and the maintenance of an unoccupied building is significantly less than with staff and students with less fuel, electricity, and maintenance.
- Because we are maintaining Hoppock School we could reopen in the future in the event of population growth.

Q8: The mental and emotional needs of the students is very important. Wouldn't making this change, especially during a time like we are in now with COVID-19, be too much change?

- We feel there is a benefit to keeping the current 5th graders in Conley as 6th graders because it is:
 - Familiar and comfortable
 - Staff and teachers they know
 - Lack of a transition to 6th grade changing buildings (visits and orientation are delayed)
 - Less change for them after the COVID-19 closure
- We will follow all guidance on the reopening of schools to ensure the safety of our staff, students, and educational community.

Q9: Won't student density be a problem if 6th grade comes to Conley with social distancing protocols due to COVID -19?

- The added 6th grade class will make the student population about 250.
- Conley's occupancy is 450 students.
- We will follow all social distancing guidelines for the reopening of school.

Q10: What is the future projection of population growth in the township? Can a demographic report be done for a future look?

- Our Township has dropped in student population from 600+ in 2005 to 349 in 2020.
- The last demographic report was conducted in 2016 and forecasted declining enrollment from 400 students in 2016 to 325 students in 2023.
- Those numbers have been accurate.
- Another study can be conducted for North Hunterdon - Voorhees and the sending districts.
- Because we are maintaining Hoppock School we could reopen in the future in the event of population growth.

Q11: What will the modular buildings be used for if added to Conley?

- Preferably offices and conference rooms.
- We believe there is enough classroom space in Conley for all of the grade levels with minor modifications.
- A study is currently being conducted by Summit Management Solutions, LLC to address the feasibility of a modular addition.
- Our planning document will be completed in early June and will be shared with the Board of Education Facilities Committee, the whole Board, and the community.