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Halifax considers consolidation of campuses

By Duane Good, EDITOR



Halifax Area School district officials anticipate sharing estimates for upgrading Enders-Fisherville Elementary School at the Tuesday, Nov. 24 board meeting. (Sentinel photo by Duane Good)

As work on the secondary campus enters its second and final year, Halifax Area School District officials now are considering the future of its two elementary buildings – Enders-Fisherville and Halifax.

Administrators have been gathering data since late July as a part of an elementary campus consolidation study, and presenting their findings at monthly school board meetings.

The latest information – specifically, a cost estimate for upgrades to Enders-Fisherville – will be shared at the next meeting, scheduled for Tuesday, Nov. 24 at 7:30 p.m. in the Halifax elementary cafeteria.

“Sometime by May or June 2016, we hope to have given to the board every possible piece of information it will need in order to make a decision on what to do next,” said district Superintendent Dr. Michele Orner who is meeting regularly with other district officials to gather and process that information.

“Slow and steady will win the race,” she noted. “We have to balance the emotional impact of consolidation with the meaningful data we see.”

Background. On the heels of a less than optimistic financial picture for the district – the latest budget raised taxes, cut positions and reduced the available fund balance – the board authorized Orner in late July to begin a study on whether Halifax and Enders-Fisherville should eventually be brought under a single campus.

Currently, Enders – located in Jackson Twp. – is the district’s early-childhood facility, housing Pre-K, kindergarten and first-grade classes. The Halifax Borough school is for second-through-fifth graders.

Orner said that, as the study commenced, the district already was aware that:

- The district lost 189 students between 2005 and 2014; by 2020, projected enrollment is 980.
- Average class sizes are below what is considered the most effective at each grade level (early-childhood, upper elementary and secondary).
- At Enders, six classrooms, one office and the multipurpose room are unused each afternoon.

- As the district's second-oldest building, Enders will need what Orner called "significant repairs in the next three-to-five years," particularly to its infrastructure (i.e. electrical, heating, plumbing and ventilation).
- Should Enders be closed, Halifax can not house additional students without renovations of its own. However, its infrastructure is comparatively in better shape, having been mostly upgraded during the past decade.

Operational costs shared. At the present time, Enders is the focus of the meetings comprised of Orner, Elementary Principal Carla Sauer, Curriculum Coordinator Dan Borrelli, Facilities Manager Allen Whitteker and Business Manager Mike Bower.

In late October, the group gave the board its findings on the cost of operating Enders on a yearly basis.

The total cost is about \$2.5 million with all factors included (i.e. salaries and benefits, bus transportation, energy, etc.).

If the school was closed and its students and staff folded in with Halifax, the net savings per year would be about \$192,000; meaning a little over \$2.3 million would be needed on top of what Halifax costs to run.

"Now the board can have a good handle on the costs they know they aren't going to get away from – things like salaries, transportation and cafeteria costs," according to Orner.

It is hoped that by the Nov. 24 meeting, the group will present to the board some upgrade estimates for Enders.

"If the board decides to keep the school, it will have to be repaired," said Orner. "We have been going through the building, piece by piece, and identifying what the concerns are and what's going to be needed to bring things up to speed."

In the future, the group also plans to gather data on what kind of work Halifax would need – especially if it's decided to fold Enders into that location.

"It would need a gymnasium for sure and renovations to the cafeteria. Right now the lunch line stretches all the way up the stairs," said Orner. "You would always have to upgrade security."

Longtime board member Gary Shade personally leans toward consolidating the elementary program in Halifax due to its larger size, in-town location and comparatively better physical condition.

"The heating and air conditioning were replaced after the molding issue (2004-2005). There were also fittings for energy-efficient lighting," he said. "It's also on the borough's water and sewer; (Enders) is on a well."

Ultimately, the board will have to decide what direction to go once all the information is in hand, according to Orner.

"Eventually if the board wants to continue looking at options, they will need an architect to come in and do a true feasibility study on both buildings, along with more definite costs on what consolidation would involve," she said.

Says no decisions were made. Orner, the district's leader since mid-2014, said she understands and respects the emotional connection that many parents have with Enders, a past "Blue Ribbon School" designate by the U.S. Department of Education for the quality of its operation.

She also respects the school's heritage, knowing that it was built as a condition for Jackson Twp. to join what was the brand new Halifax Joint (later Area) School District in the late 1950s.

"I understand that (Enders) is a special place," she said. "Even now, there is a definite sense of 'community' that's present."

Some personnel moves have given people the impression that Enders already is on its way out – an impression Orner said is not correct.

Most recently, Halifax Principal Dr. Craig Raisner asked to be transferred to a vacant elementary music teaching post. The board appointed Sauer – who had replaced Borrelli as Enders principal – to lead both buildings instead of hiring a new administrator for one or the other.

“People said, ‘It’s pretty obvious you are going to close (Enders).’ No, it’s not very obvious at all,” Orner noted. “It would have been irresponsible of us to be spending money for a replacement principal while we are still in the process of this consolidation study.

In the end, the district will have to look at many factors before deciding on a direction forward, according to Orner.

“We have to weigh both the short-term and long-term impact of consolidation,” she said.
