

Schalmont News

CENTRAL SCHOOLS

Difficult decisions on the horizon

Declining enrollment and state aid among challenges facing district

Faced with declining enrollment, decreasing state aid and rising operating costs, the Schalmont Central School District is at a critical crossroads.

District enrollment has been declining steadily, particularly over the past five years during which enrollment dropped 11 percent—from 2,182 students to 1,951 today; by 2019, enrollment is projected to drop to as low as 1,600 to 1,800.

The effect of declining enrollment has created less than ideal situations, such as class-size inequity among buildings and combined grade levels in some schools.

Further exacerbating the situation is state education funding, which has been dropping year after year. Experts predict New York state's fiscal crisis will continue for years to come, and public schools can expect future cuts to state aid.

"This is one of the most challenging financial times our state has ever faced," said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey.

"It's become clear the state is no longer a reliable funding source."

When revenue from the state decreases, schools have to reduce expenditures or increase funding from their other main revenue source—local taxpayers.

Schalmont's Board of Education has worked on controlling the amount of the tax levy increase each year to mitigate the impact on taxpayers. This has been made possible by bringing staffing levels in line with declining enrollment through reductions. Other reductions have also been made to athletic and extracurricular programs, equipment, supplies and field trips. Last year alone, the district made \$1.5 million in spending cuts. [A complete list of cuts is available online.]

The district continues to explore ways to control costs and reduce spending to limit tax levy increases. For example, the district's energy conservation program has saved approximately \$430,000 since 2008.

Although the district maintains a sufficient undesignated fund balance, district officials believe it would be irresponsible to use all of these "rainy-day" funds to make up for cuts in state aid.

"If we use up our fund balance, we won't have it going forward," said Business Administrator Mark Kellet. "It would be irresponsible to use a one-time payment to solve problems that are going to come back year after year. We need to reduce costs to match our sources of revenue."

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Mark your calendar, and plan to attend

Because the majority of a school's budget goes to paying salaries and benefits, the most significant way to trim the budget is through more efficient use of its staff, Kellet added.

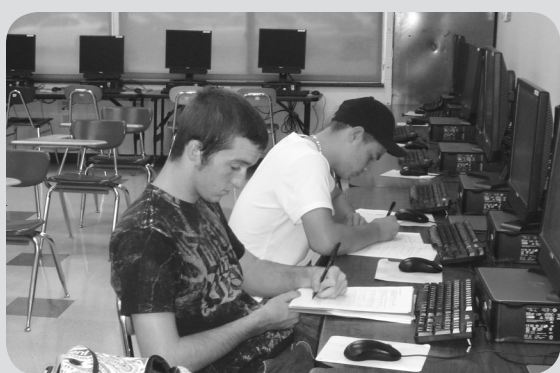
To prepare students to compete in a global marketplace the district needs to effectively use its resources and focus on the community's highest priorities, according to Kelsey.

"We're at the point where there's not much left to cut without adversely affecting the successful educational programs we've worked so hard on creating over the years," said Kelsey.

The educational landscape in New York is changing; students are faced with new national standards and more rigorous assessments all designed to ensure they are prepared for college and a 21st century-workforce where critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and excellent communication skills are vital to their success.

Now, more than ever, Schalmont must maximize its resources and its commitment to providing all students with a high-quality education at a reasonable cost.

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Schalmont is committed to ensuring all students are prepared for college and a 21st-century workforce by offering students access to unique, advanced and vocational programs in addition to the core curriculum.

Efficiency study outlines possible options for consideration

Community input vital to decision-making process

A study outlining a variety of options to more efficiently deliver Schalmont's kindergarten through twelfth-grade program will be the focus of roundtable discussions open to the community this fall and winter (see page 4 for dates).

The options range from maintaining the status quo to closing a school or schools and combining attendance zones among other configurations (see chart below).

The study, completed by Advisory Solutions—a consultant group created by the New York State School Boards Association—identifies the advantages and challenges associated with each option.

District officials are currently reviewing the financial implications of each, and will share that data as it becomes available.

According to the study's author, Dr. Paul M. Seversky, enrollment projections, analysis of school building capacity levels and program delivery in those facilities formed the rationale for each suggestion. He also took into consideration the values and policies guiding the district's vision and its long-range planning efforts.

Ultimately, the goal of the study was to identify options the district, board and community could further explore together.

"The district's leadership team has knowledge of the district's history, its culture and the preferences held by school district stakeholders," said Seversky. "They are ultimately responsible, and most able to determine, with community engagement, which delivery option, adapted option or set of options for the future will be best to deliver instruction."

According to the report, all schools are operating well under capacity and can accommodate enrollment shifts. Currently all three elementary schools enroll kindergarten through fifth-graders, but

two of the schools are operating substantially under capacity. This is true at the middle/high school as well.

"There is much to consider, but we must work together as a community to decide what's best for our students and taxpayers," said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey. "These are only potential options at this point, and the board is not bound to any one of them, nor have they agreed to move forward in any specific direction."

At this point, district officials are waiting to gauge feedback from the community on what's most important to them before they begin narrowing down the options.

"It's likely some of the options will be dismissed rather quickly as not the right

solution for our community," said Kelsey. "However, we want our community to be fully aware of and engaged in the process right from the beginning. We will reach those decisions together."

The entire community—students, parents, grandparents, staff, taxpayers and business owners—are encouraged to get involved, provide input and discuss the challenges ahead.

Declining enrollment and a variety of financial challenges prompted the Board of Education to commission the efficiency study in Dec. 2009. The completed report was presented to the board at its meeting on Sept. 13, 2010, and made available to the public immediately preceding that meeting. It is available on the district website. ❖

Summary of options up for discussion

Scenario A:

Maintain the status quo, by continuing the current pattern of delivery.

Scenario B:

Combine Mariaville and Woestina attendance zones into one. Serve kindergarten to second grade at one building and third through fifth at the other or vice versa.

Scenario C:

Close Mariaville or Woestina. The remaining facility would become a kindergarten through second grade school. Grades three through five would go to Jefferson.

Scenario D:

Move fifth-graders districtwide to the middle/high school campus. Combine Mariaville and Woestina attendance zones into one and use one of the schools to serve kindergarten to second grade while closing the other. Grades three through four would go to Jefferson.

Scenario E:

Close Mariaville or Woestina and redraw attendance zones so that 129 students attend the remaining school. The other students would go to Jefferson. Fifth-graders could also be housed at the middle/high school campus.

Scenario F:

Close both Mariaville and Woestina and send kindergarten through fourth-graders to Jefferson and move fifth-graders to the middle/high school campus.

Scenario G:

Consider an alternative solution or mix and match the options listed above.



Q&A about the efficiency study

Q. What is the purpose of the efficiency study?

The efficiency study was designed to gather data on delivery of the district's kindergarten through twelfth-grade program to determine more efficient ways to deliver services at a reasonable cost.

Q. Why was the study conducted?

For several years, the Board of Education has made long-range financial planning one of its annual goals. In light of a steady decline in enrollment, rising costs and threats of mid-year state funding cuts, in Dec. 2009, the board felt it prudent and necessary to conduct the study as a means of finding possible opportunities for savings.

Q. Who conducted the study?

District officials felt it was critical to have an independent, neutral party, conduct an objective review of the district's services. To that end, Advisory Solutions, a consultant group operated by the New York State School Boards Association, conducted the study.

Q. What did the study analyze?

The study reviewed pupil capacity; space utilization in the district's five school buildings and estimated future enrollment trends based on historical enrollment data, historical live data and patterns of enrollment at each grade level. This was done while considering the values and policies that guide the vision of the district and its long-range planning efforts.

Q. What were the results of the study?

The study identified a variety of potential options (see page 2 for details)

to more efficiently deliver the district's educational program while outlining the opportunities and challenges associated with each.

Q. What are the cost savings per option?

District officials are currently reviewing the cost implications of each potential option and will share those findings during the upcoming discussions.

Q. Is the study available publicly?

Yes. The complete 174-page report is available on the district website. Hard copies are also available for viewing in each school's main offices and at the public library. Community members are encouraged to read the entire report, digest its contents and be prepared to voice their opinions, concerns and suggestions during the upcoming discussions.

Q. Has a decision been reached?

No. The study was designed to serve as a tool to help guide conversations with the community. A decision will not be reached until feedback has been gathered.

Q. Will there be a public vote?

No, the Board of Education will reach a decision in mid to late January based, in part, on the feedback it receives from the community during roundtable discussions scheduled throughout the fall and winter. The discussions are designed to engage the entire community in conversations regarding the study's findings and their implementation. Any potential changes will be incorporated into budget planning for the 2011-12 school year.

Q. How can I learn more?

Attend the upcoming roundtable discussions. During the Oct. 13 and 14 sessions, specific findings from the study will be shared by Advisory Solutions. All information pertaining to the study and roundtable discussions will also be made available on the district website at www.schalmont.org. To further keep the community informed and engaged throughout the discussions, the district has joined Facebook and Twitter. Information will also be available via the district's opt-in news service, School News Notifier, local media outlets and other communication vehicles, as appropriate. ❖

■ Fiscal challenges

– continued from pg. 1

Difficult decisions are on the horizon, and the entire community is going to be vital to the decision-making process.

"We are facing some difficult choices—maintain the status quo and accept future tax levy increases, make additional cuts to academic and extracurricular programming and staff or explore structural changes, both inside our classrooms and to our school buildings," said Kelsey.

To that end, a series of discussions will be held throughout the fall

and winter as a way to engage the community in conversations about their values, priorities and sacrifices they're willing to make.

"There will be no easy answers, and everyone will likely feel a pinch, but it is our responsibility to begin these difficult conversations now," said Kelsey. "The challenges before us are severe, but I'm confident that, by working together, we'll emerge from this period stronger and more efficient with the ability to provide programming that meets all student's needs." ❖



Produced in cooperation with the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service.

Schalmont

CENTRAL SCHOOLS

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Board Calendar

Schalmont Board of Education public meetings are held at 7 p.m. unless otherwise noted.

Monday, Oct. 25

Middle School LGI Room
2 Sabre Drive

Monday, Nov. 8

Woestina Elementary School
1292 Main Street
Rotterdam Junction

Monday, Nov. 22

Middle School LGI Room
2 Sabre Drive

Reunion Calendar

Planning a class reunion? If so, please visit www.schalmont.org to share the details.

Class of 1985

Nov. 27, 2010, at 7 p.m.
Mallozzi's Restaurant
1930 Curry Rd. (location change)
rbikowicz2000@yahoo.com
jsquires11@aol.com

Class of 2000

Nov. 25, 2010
Settles Hill Tree Farm, Altamont
cney9501@hotmail.com

Class of 1986

May 28, 2011
Mallozzi's Restaurant
1930 Curry Rd.
schalmont1986@aol.com

We want to hear from you!

What should Schalmont schools look like in the future? You can help decide. Please plan to join us for a series of roundtable discussions throughout the fall and winter. Your input is critical to the decision-making process. **All meetings will be held at the middle/high school campus.**

Wednesday, October 13, 7 p.m.*

Presentation on the study's findings in the auditorium, followed by discussions in the high school cafeteria

Thursday, October 14, 7 p.m.*

Presentation on the study's findings in the auditorium, followed by discussions in the high school cafeteria

Wednesday, November 3, 7 p.m.

Roundtable discussion in the high school cafeteria

Tuesday, November 16, 7 p.m.

Roundtable discussion in the high school cafeteria

Monday, December 13, 6 p.m.

Roundtable discussion in the middle school cafeteria prior to the 7 p.m. Board of Education meeting, which will be held in the middle school LGI.

**It is not necessary to attend both the October 13 & 14 meetings as they will both be exactly the same. However, residents are encouraged to attend all roundtable discussions from Nov. 3 - Dec. 13.*

RSVPs are encouraged, but not required. To confirm your attendance at any of the discussions, complete the RSVP form online at www.schalmont.org or call the district's communications specialist at 355-9200, ext. 4006. Please be prepared to include your name, e-mail address, phone number, affiliation with the district and expected date(s) of attendance.



Don't be left out in the cold! Sign up for the district's opt-in news service, School News Notifier, to receive e-mail notifications and/or text messages regarding school closings and delays due to inclement weather or other reason. You may also sign up to receive information directly from your child's school as well as information and news affecting the entire school district. Visit www.schalmont.org for details.