

Schalmont News

CENTRAL SCHOOLS

Efficiency Study Update

Board unanimously adopts resolution to close two elementary schools, relocate fifth-graders

The Schalmont Board of Education unanimously adopted a resolution in February to close both Mariaville and Woestina elementary schools, effective June 30, 2011.

All kindergarten through fourth-grade students, including the approximately 166 students from Mariaville and Woestina, will begin attending Jefferson Elementary School this fall, and all fifth-graders will attend the middle school.

“This was an extremely difficult and emotional decision for everyone involved,” said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey. “However, I believe this was the tough decision that needed to be made to ensure a fair balance of quality programs and services for all district students while being sensitive to the needs of our taxpayers.”

The closures will save an estimated \$1.2–\$1.4 million at a time when the district is faced with declining enrollment, rising operating costs and a significant gap between expenses and revenues. It will

also help balance the per pupil cost at the elementary level, which currently has a difference of roughly \$3,000 depending on the school.

The decision comes after months of discussions in which residents evaluated several potential scenarios designed to more efficiently deliver the district’s kindergarten through twelfth-grade programming. The board commissioned an independent review of the district’s facilities in December 2009, as part of its long-term financial planning.

“Generally the feedback we received indicated that doing nothing was not an option,” said Board of Education President Kevin Thompson. “Our community said they cannot afford to pay higher taxes although they believe in maintaining educational programs.”

Thompson noted that the board’s decision was reached in order to prudently plan for the long-term financial stability of the district.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo’s executive budget proposal, in which Schalmont is slated for a \$1.1 million cut in state aid, and the potential property tax proposal both present very real and difficult financial challenges to the district as well (see page 3 for details). “While school closings are probably

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one of the most difficult decisions a school board has to make, I believe this is the path that had to be pursued to maintain the integrity of our educational programming for all of our students,” said Thompson.

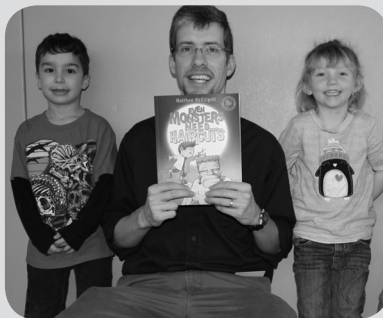
Over the past few years, district officials have been addressing declining enrollment and cuts to state aid by enacting a variety of cost-saving initiatives and reducing staffing by 13 percent. In addition, more than \$1.5 million in reductions were made in last year’s budget alone.

District officials have indicated that additional cuts will be needed in order to balance the 2011-12 budget. However, the school board has indicated that maintaining class sizes and providing students with access to academic programming that prepares them for success in college, the workforce and beyond remain their top priorities.

“I have no doubt that we’ll be able to work together to make this a positive transition for all of our students,” said Kelsey. “Schalmont has a reputation for excellence, and that’s certainly not going to change.” ❖

Elementary schools join together for author visit:

Students from all of the district’s elementary schools came together at Jefferson earlier this winter to hear from popular children’s book author and illustrator Matt McElligott. More opportunities are being planned to bring the three school communities together throughout the end of the school year.



Planning a smooth transition that meets all students needs

Now that a decision has been reached regarding the school building reconfiguration process, parents, teachers, staff and administrators are beginning to work together to create a transition plan that meets all students' academic, social and emotional needs.

"Collaboration is key to ensuring a transition process that is as smooth as possible for everyone involved," said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey.

To that end, feedback received from roundtable discussions held earlier this fall and winter as well as during committee meetings and through other means will help guide the transition process.

"I understand that not everyone is happy with this decision and that there are many questions that need to be addressed," said Kelsey. "However, I encourage everyone to bear with us as we navigate through this process to address your concerns and create a transition plan that welcomes and integrates all students to their new schools."

Relocating fifth-graders to the middle school

While it has been determined that fifth-graders will continue to ride elementary school buses to the middle school next year and attend classes in the traditional elementary format, there are many other details still up for discussion.

Questions raised during the roundtable discussions that need to be addressed include lunch time procedures, logistics surrounding staggered start times, recess, class activities, bullying, and the use of lockers or cubbies, among others.

To help address these concerns and provide feedback, parents of next year's fifth-graders, teachers and staff were encouraged to join a fifth-grade transition committee.

The group, which is co-chaired by

Schalmont Middle School Principal Michael Kondratowicz and Jefferson Elementary School Principal Joby Gifford, will meet several times this spring. Meeting minutes will be posted on the district website and distributed via backpack mail.

An additional committee will be formed this fall to discuss the long-term structure of the middle school program and potential changes to transportation arrangements for sixth-graders.

"This is an excellent opportunity to explore the possibility of an intermediate grade format that houses fifth- and sixth-graders together at the middle school," said Kondratowicz. "We'll be exploring advantages associated with this model, such as providing students with a slower transition into middle school."

Any changes would be incorporated for the 2012-13 school year.

Integrating kindergarten through fourth-graders at Jefferson

District officials agree the transition plan for kindergarten through fourth-

graders must recognize the important role both small schools have played in their communities for generations.

Families should also find many similarities and familiar enrichment opportunities in their new elementary school. For example, each year Jefferson holds fundraisers, book fairs, food drives, craft fairs, musicals, afterschool programs, friendship games, reading programs and a variety of holiday celebrations.

Parents will also have opportunities to get involved and represent their communities on the PTO and other school-wide committees, such as the shared decision-making team.

District officials are currently planning a variety of events and activities that will bring students and staff from the three elementary schools together before the end of the school year. In addition, an orientation program will be held for all students who will be changing schools. Stay tuned for details. ❖

Frequently asked questions

What are some ways I can talk to my child about his/her school closing?

If your child is affected by a school closure, consider talking with him or her about the opportunity to meet new friends and teachers and become part of a new special place.

What will happen to the two school buildings slated to close?

A decision has not yet been made. However, the school board will be exploring its options over the next few months with the goal of finding successful rental opportunities for both buildings.

How will the closures affect staffing?

More information about any potential layoffs will be determined as part of the budget development process.

I heard bids were being sought for new construction at Jefferson. Is this true?

No. Bids are currently being sought to move forward with renovations scheduled for this summer to replace the gym roof and some temperature controls, which were approved as part of the 2007 capital project vote.

How long will bus rides be to school?

New bus routes for kindergarten through fifth-graders have been analyzed and will continue to average approximately 45 minutes, which complies with district's bus scheduling and routing policy.

For a complete list of frequently asked questions, visit the district website.



Governor proposes drastic cuts in state aid

Proposals at the state level among factors impacting board's decision

In addition to declining enrollment and increasing operating costs, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's budget proposal weighed heavily on Schalmont's Board of Education decision to reconfigure the district's schools.

Schalmont is slated to lose more than \$1.1 million (or 9.5 percent) in state aid from this year to next under the governor's executive budget proposal.

In addition, the governor's property tax cap proposal would call for property tax levy increases to be limited to the rate of

inflation or 2 percent—whichever is less.

"When funding is cut, it means devastating consequences to our district, which has already cut significant staff and programs to offset aid cuts and enrollment changes in previous years," said Superintendent Dr. Valerie Kelsey.

Use of undesignated fund balance

The governor has suggested that schools tap into their undesignated fund balances to cover cuts in state aid.

Schalmont follows state guidelines

that allow for 4 percent of the annual school budget to be placed in an undesignated fund balance. Using the fund to make up for state aid cuts and to maintain the current level of district operations would lower the amount available to offset the local tax levy as well as the district's ability to respond to emergency facility needs.

"It would be poor financial planning to so quickly wipe out our fund balance," said Business Administrator Mark Kellett. "As we're faced with some significant budget challenges next year and in the years to come, reserves are not a continuing revenue stream that can be depended upon."

Commitment to students and taxpayers

The 2010-11 school budget proposal did not increase spending and raised the school tax levy by less than 1 percent. The year before, the school tax levy did not increase at all.

This trend is becoming more difficult to maintain because the straightforward cuts to make—such as cutting a class section in response to lower enrollment—have already been made.

"So far this year, we have made some painful decisions we never imagined we would have to consider," said Kelsey. "It's heartbreaking to see two schools steeped in history and culture and cherished so deeply by their communities close."

Budget development

The proposed loss of state aid, combined with increased costs such as salaries, health insurance and required pension contributions, means that the district is headed into the development of the 2011-12 budget with a significant gap between projected revenues and expenditures.

The extent of that gap will only be known for sure when the political negotiations at the state level are complete.

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Efficiency study timeline

December 2009: School board votes unanimously to approve an efficiency study in the wake of declining enrollment, rising operating costs and decreasing state aid.

September 2010: School board accepts completed efficiency study; encourages residents to get involved in planned discussions.

Oct. 13 & 14, 2010: Residents learn about the district's financial outlook and the study's major findings during formal presentations, followed by small group discussions.

Nov. 3, 2010: Residents hear a detailed analysis of the financial savings—or in some cases, increased costs—associated with seven potential scenarios designed to more efficiently deliver the district's kindergarten through 12th-grade programming, then break into small groups for discussions.

Nov. 16, 2010: Residents come together to discuss a new enrollment scenario added in response to requests from the community. They also learn more about the possibility of moving fifth-graders to the middle school and likely budget cuts if no changes are made.

November 2010: A districtwide Transportation Committee begins meeting to review school policies for cost-saving opportunities in areas such as centralized bus stops, the length of time on buses and walking distances for students.

Dec. 13, 2010: District officials provide residents with an overview of feedback received to date—outlining the most common concerns and benefits of each scenario.

Feb. 1, 2011: The governor releases his executive budget proposal, outlining a potential property tax cap and cuts to state education aid.

Feb. 14, 2011: School board unanimously adopts resolution to close two elementary schools and relocate fifth-graders.

March 2011: Fifth-Grade Transition Committee forms.

June 30, 2011: Mariaville and Woestina elementary schools are slated to close.

September 2011: All kindergarten through fourth-graders will begin attending Jefferson Elementary School while fifth-graders will attend the middle school. ❖



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Schalmont

CENTRAL SCHOOLS

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STAY INFORMED! Sign-up to receive budget news via School News Notifier or follow the process online at www.schalmont.org.

News and Notes

Bowling for a cause: Thanks to an outpouring of community support, the Schalmont Athletic Association raised more than \$5,000 at its fourth annual “No Tap” Bowling Outing at Boulevard Bowl in February. Proceeds from the event will help the association continue to support student-athletes and the district’s athletic program.

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Charity hoops: Faculty, staff and volunteers came together in February for a charity basketball game to raise money for the Children’s Hospital at Albany Medical Center. More than \$2,500 was raised through the sale of tickets, baked goods and a 50/50 raffle.

Reunion Calendar

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

Class of 1986

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

Mark your calendar

2011-12 budget development schedule

The entire community is encouraged to get involved in the budget planning process. Please mark your calendar with the key dates listed below. A complete budget development schedule and more information is available at www.schalmont.org.

Tuesday, March 15

Budget Advisory Committee Meeting #2, MS LGI, 6 p.m.

Monday, March 21

Budget Advisory Committee Meeting #3, MS LGI, 6 p.m.
Community Budget Forum #1, HS, 7 p.m.

Monday, March 28

Board of Education Meeting, MS LGI, 7 p.m.
(Third budget draft to be presented)

Monday, April 11

Board of Education Meeting/Community Budget Forum #2, Woestina, 7 p.m. (2011-12 budget proposal to be adopted)

Monday, April 18

Deadline to submit school board candidate petitions

Monday, April 25

Board of Education Meeting, MS LGI, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, April 26

Budget statement available at district office and all schools

Monday, May 9

Board of Education Meeting/Official Budget Hearing
Possible “Meet the Candidates Night,” Jefferson, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, May 17

Annual Election and Budget Vote,
HS new gym foyer, 6 a.m. - 9 p.m. ❖

■ Governor’s budget

– continued from pg. 3

“While the board’s decision does not fill the entire budget gap we’re facing, it will help significantly as we continue to look for ways to balance next year’s budget,” said Kelsey.

The school board will begin working with the Community Budget Advisory Committee—a volunteer group of parents, community members and staff—in March to help shape the 2011-12 budget proposal.

Together, they will review the proposed budget, discuss program expenses and cuts, ask questions and make suggestions.

Residents are encouraged to provide their input by attending any of the meetings scheduled for this spring.

Information will also be made available via the district website at www.schalmont.org, Facebook, Twitter and School News Notifier. The annual budget newsletter will be mailed in early May. ❖