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Much unsettled as vote on school plan nears

School board members undecided, election challengers opposed to consolidation proposal

By Josh Verges
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In February 2020, the vote was 7-0 as St. Paul school board members kicked off an administrative planning process they were told could result in the closure of several schools because of declining enrollment.

But now that those eight schools

have been named, and parents and staff have begun pushing back, it's unclear whether the consolidation plan will even pass on Nov. 16.

"I'm still anguishing over this decision," John Brodrick told fellow board members last week. "I'll sit and allow the process to work, although at this point in time, right now, I'm very uneasy."

The consolidation would displace some 3,000 students, or 9 percent of those enrolled in the district. Administrators say larger schools are necessary to create the economies of scale needed to hire the specialized staff who provide a well-rounded education.

But board members have yet to buy in.

Board member Chauntyll Allen said she "believes in well-rounded schools," but she's unsure whether the consolidation plan, Envision SPPS, is the answer.

"I really think that we need to do something drastically different in the St. Paul Public Schools than we've been doing," she said. "I don't know if Envision SPPS is addressing some of the issues that we need to look at in order to prevent these enrollment issues moving forward."

ELECTION TIMING

The last time the district underwent a major reorganization, in 2011, the school board held a series

of 7-0 votes in favor of Valeria Silva's Strong Schools, Strong Communities plan.

It's a near certainty that Superintendent Joe Gothard won't get seven votes on Nov. 16 — and getting to the four he needs may not be easy, either.

The board's most vocal critic of the consolidation has been Yusef Carrillo, whose family is closely tied to Wellstone Elementary, which is slated to close. Carrillo was appointed in

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March to fill in for Steve Marchese following his resignation.

Carrillo won't be around for the Nov. 16 vote because his seat is on Tuesday's ballot, and he's not one of the two candidates running. Whoever wins will be seated just days before the Nov. 16 vote.

If it's Clayton Howatt — a parent who fought in 2016 to keep Galtier Elementary open, only to now see it on the chopping block again — the consolidation plan will get a no vote.

If it's board chairwoman Jeannie Foster, who supports the consolidation, then there will be only six people on the board on Nov. 16. Once the votes are canvassed, Foster would move over to her new two-year seat, likely leaving her four-year seat vacant until the newly elected board members take office in January.

Foster's decision to run in the special election, instead of her current seat, effectively creates a vote against consolidation because the plan would fail on a 3-3 vote.

Foster's health could imperil the plan, too. She recently fell ill with COVID-19 and missed last week's meetings while recovering at home.

BOARD UNDECIDED

Foster is the only board member who has clearly signaled her support for the consolidation.

"In order to keep the district healthy and to give each student a world-class education, we must make some tough decisions that involve consolidation of certain schools. The reality is that schools cannot provide the resources for world-class education in those attended by very few students. This district cannot continue to divert resources from one school to keep the doors open on the next," a campaign organizer said by email on her behalf.

Jessica Kopp has sounded supportive of the plan during meetings but did not respond to a request for comment. As a parent at Hamline Elementary, she was involved with talks in 2015 about the future of Hamline and Galtier, two former magnet schools in the Midway that never gained footholds as community schools.

In 2016, Silva recommended merging those two schools at Hamline. That proposal, which the school board rejected on a 4-3 vote, now is back on the table as part of Gothard's plan.

Two of the board members who voted to save Galtier in 2016 still are on the board: Brodrick and Zuki Ellis.

Brodrick, who will leave the board at the end of the year, said in an interview that he'll make up his mind over the next two weeks, as the board has multiple opportunities to hear from the public.

Ellis, who plans to run for state Senate next year, did not return a phone message.

Jim Vue, who is up for reelection but will be on the board Nov. 16 whether he wins or not, said he wants to hear from the public before deciding on the consolidation.

"What we have right now is the what and the why, the rationale," he said in an interview. "We haven't fully flushed out the how and the when."

Allen also said she's undecided.

CANDIDATES OPPOSE IT

If the consolidation doesn't pass next month, it may never pass in its current form.

That's because the most active challengers on Tuesday's school board ballot all oppose it, and come January, between two and four of them will be on the board.

"A 'well rounded' education is part of our problem but the bigger problem is poor management of our schools, especially our schools with the highest needs. That must be addressed if we hope to make any plan a success, especially one that is so painful as closing schools," Howatt said on Facebook.

James Farnsworth calls the plan inequitable and says the district should have engaged the school communities on the front end rather than devising a plan and seeking their input afterward.

"I think the school district needs to take a really bold step to address the declining enrollment crisis that's been plaguing the district for too long, but this is not that bold step," he said in a video message.

Uriah Ward also said the district should have involved families as it made its recommendations.

"It's a bad sign that so many of our stakeholders were surprised by the proposal. I believe the school board should postpone the vote,



Joe Gothard



Jackie Turner



Jeannie Foster



Jim Vue



Chauntyll Allen



John Brodrick



Yusef Carrillo



James Farnsworth



Jennifer McPherson



Clayton Howatt

seek additional community feedback, and amend the proposal based on what we're hearing from Saint Paul families," he said by email.

Halla Henderson said in an interview that "it's absolutely possible we have too many schools," but she has "deep concerns about closing schools that are predominantly attended by students of color," such as Highwood Hills Elementary.

Jennifer McPherson said the con-

solidation would "drive more families out of SPPS."

"If the district wanted to close these schools to revamp them I would support that but to close them and displace our children who already have been possibly displaced by housing is way too much trauma for our children and families," she said by email.

Ryan Williams did not respond to a request for comment.

DATA VS. EMOTION

Gothard told board members he was made aware of numerous underenrolled schools soon after he became superintendent in 2017. He committed as part of his strategic plan to identify what is and is not working and to allocate resources in a more strategic way.

"I still don't believe that there's any process that would help us go to our community and have the community say, you know what, let's close our school," he said.

Chief Operating Officer Jackie Turner explained in February 2020 that the planning would intentionally exclude parents or others with ties to certain school buildings so that the reorganization plan could be created based on data, not emotion.

As the board has begun hearing from people connected to the schools slated to merge or close, Turner has urged board members to focus on their goal of making a well-rounded education available to all students.

"If you believe that certain students should have access to a well-rounded education and certain ones shouldn't, then you may come up with a different belief or a different vote," she said last week.

The board so far has held three meetings where the public had a chance to comment or ask questions about the plan. Before the Nov. 16 vote, there will be three more such opportunities in English, as well as information sessions in Somali, Hmong and Karen.

For board member Carrillo, though, the timeline is too tight and opportunities for engagement too few.

"I feel like we're rushing through and hoping that we can get a yes vote on Nov. 16, but we're not building trust and creating buy-in for people and to what the overall plan is," he said. "I hope that we can use these meetings that are coming up to change our strategy, because oth-

erwise, people are not going to jump on this bus; they're going to slash the tires."

ENVISION SPPS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FALL 2022

•LEAP High, which serves new immigrants, would close, and its students would attend language academies within traditional high schools.

•Highwood Hills Elementary would close, but the rec center would stay open.

•Galtier Elementary would close and send its students to Hamline. Galtier could become an early learning hub.

•John A. Johnson Elementary would close and merge with Bruce Vento, which would get a newly constructed building in the coming years.

•Students from the lower campus of L'Etoile du Nord French Immersion would move to the upper campus, about a mile away. The lower campus building at 1305 Prosperity Ave. could become an early learning hub.

•Jackson Elementary would close. Its Hmong Dual Language Immersion students would go to Phalen Lake, while the community students go to Maxfield.

•The Montessori program at Parkway Middle School would shut down and be reborn as the middle school site for Hmong studies. Students in the Hmong programs at Washington Technology Magnet and Battle Creek Middle School could continue at those schools, but any rising sixth-graders would start at Parkway.

•Montessori students at Cherokee Heights Elementary would move to J.J. Hill. Riverview Elementary's community students would move to Cherokee Heights, but Riverview's Spanish immersion students would stay.

•Wellstone Elementary would close. Its Spanish immersion students would move to Riverview, and its BioSmart program would close.

•Obama Elementary would close. In 2024 or 2025, following a renovation, Obama would absorb the J.J. Hill Montessori program in one half of the building, while the other half becomes a community middle school.

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