

Questions Received Concerning A Possible Elementary School Closure

Q: Why are you considering closing a school after passing the instructional levy last May?

A: The purpose of the levy was to hire more teachers to lower class sizes and to buy textbooks. It was clearly said throughout the campaign that the success or failure of the levy would have no impact on a school-closure decision.

Q: What was the recommendation of the Long-Term Facility Taskforce after studying facilities in the district for four months?

A: This citizen group recommended the closure of an elementary school to bring about long- and short-term efficiencies.

Q: Would the closing of a school result in higher class sizes?

A: The teachers of a closed school would be transferred to the schools to which the students were transferred. Therefore, class size would not change.

Q: With the successful passing of the levy, why is the district concerned with saving money?

A: The successful levy was a big help as it allowed the district to hire 15 additional teachers and purchase badly needed curriculum materials. However, it did not end the financial challenges that KFCS, like districts across the state, is facing. Financial pressures from all angles are forcing districts to look for efficiencies in every way possible.

One of the biggest problems is the Public Employee Retirement System cost escalations. This alone will cost our district an estimated additional \$700,000 next year. We will get the exact numbers next week. This figure will go up even more the year after. If the state continues to flat fund education, as they have done for four straight years, while added financial burdens are placed on districts, the only choice districts have is to find efficiencies, cut programs, and/or increase class sizes.

Q: A number of times the condition and age of our buildings has been given as a challenge and as a reason to consider a school closure. I do not understand how this can be. Our buildings seem so well maintained.

A: That is a good observation. The district custodial and maintenance staff have done an exceptional job of keeping buildings clean and welcoming. However, there is no hiding the age and needs of our facilities. Our elementary schools were built in the 1920's and before (Mills was built in 1910). Age has taken its toll on the mechanical, electrical, heating, and wiring systems of these facilities. This says nothing about the

improvements needed in flooring, walls, bathrooms and so forth. As a result, millions of dollars will be needed in the next few years to keep school doors open. Naturally, the more buildings we have the greater this cost will be.

Q. What is the problem with this? Can't you just use the money the state gives you for building maintenance to fix these problems?

A. The state gives districts no money for building upkeep or renovation. Therefore, any money a district has to do maintenance comes from the same funds the district receives for classroom instruction. Admittedly, the district has received over \$2 million from the County Road Funds in the last three years to help with building upkeep. They also have \$1.2 million in a building fund from land sales that is used for repair and maintenance. However, these funds barely touch the \$37 million in facility repair and improvement needs that are in the district facility plan. Fairview and Pelican alone have more than \$7.5 million in improvement needs. The district can continue to put off building improvement, but a day of reckoning is not far off for all district buildings.

Q. Is there adequate space to house K-5 students at the remaining elementary schools if one is closed?

A. If our current enrollment numbers hold steady over time, either site will provide enough classrooms for our students in combination with the remaining three elementary schools. Today we are using 59 classrooms to house K-5 students. If we closed Fairview and continued using Pelican, we would have 65 classrooms available. If we chose Fairview and closed Pelican, we would have 69.

Q. Does Ponderosa have enough room to take in next year's 6th graders?

A. Yes it does. We identified 27 classrooms at Ponderosa last year. Counting the two gyms that have students every period, the number bumps up to 29 learning spaces. If the building had 250 students per class, 28 rooms would be required. That said, there are several locations where slight re-modeling could be done to create even more classrooms. It is unlikely we will have 750 students so the need for this remodeling is unlikely. At current numbers for next year's 6-8 graders, we will have 700 students.

Q. Will Ponderosa's class sizes increase due to it becoming a 6-8 grade building?

A. The move to change to a 6-8 grade building should have no impact on class sizes.

Q. What will the boundaries look like if an elementary school is closed?

A. A boundary realignment will be done only if it is decided to close a school and the school is identified for closure. This is a very time--intensive process and it will not be done until it is known for sure that it is necessary.

Q. What are the costs to make this transition? How does that offset the long-term financial benefit?

- A.** There would be a net annual savings of between \$200,000-\$300,000 by closing a school. This is after additional costs for busing and some moving costs are factored in. This does not count the savings recouped from not having to do expensive repairs to one of the two buildings. Fairview's repair costs for the next 10 years were estimated to be \$4.6 million and Pelican's \$3.1 million in the facility study conducted last year by DLR Architects from Portland.

A TOUGH CHOICE

By Paul Hillyer, Superintendent

A tough question will soon be answered: Will an elementary school be closed in Klamath Falls? Having to make a school closing decision is one of the most heart-wrenching assignments any school board can have. It has become a common issue in our tough financial times; many districts in the state and nation are struggling with the same challenge. The two schools under consideration are Pelican and Fairview.

The question really boils down to a financial one: The district would save between \$200,000 and \$300,000 dollars annually by closing an elementary school. This does not count the millions of dollars in maintenance and upkeep savings that closing a school makes possible. DLR, an architectural firm hired last year to do a district facility study, estimated about \$4.6 million in such costs for Fairview in the next ten years and about \$3.07 million at Pelican. Is this savings worth the cost of losing a neighborhood school? That is the big question.

Are there other issues to consider in closing a school? The answer is yes. One is class sizes, another is educational programming, a third is neighborhood supports, a fourth is local convenience, and a fifth is planning for the future of education in the district.

Districts with larger elementary schools with more sections at each grade are able to even out class sizes more equally. Simply put, the more sections you have at a building the more similar you can make class sizes. One or two section buildings naturally have great upswings and downswings in class sizes grade-to-grade based on the number of students in that neighborhood in a given year. A related benefit is a reduction in blended classrooms, or classes that have more than one grade in them. Blends are more prevalent in smaller buildings. They result from upswings and downswings in local student populations.

Closing a school would not solve either of these problems, but it would lessen them.

On the flip side, there is a local attachment common to smaller neighborhood schools. Neighbors seem to be more willing to volunteer in the school that is near to them. Also, churches and service organizations are sometimes willing to lend a hand to a school in near proximity. Proximity is also important to those wishing to be within walking distance of a school.

Another advantage to smaller schools is personalizing education. Small schools tend to have a very close family-like feel to them. Sometimes students at smaller schools receive more

attention as they and their families are more familiar to the staff of the school than are students who go to larger schools.

If a decision were made to close a school, a second question surfaces: Which school should be closed? This is another very thorny subject fraught with controversy. Neither the Fairview or the Pelican facility is ideal. As mentioned above, they both are old (built in 1920 and 1921) and have many high-cost repair and upkeep issues. Their ages also restrict their usefulness in meeting the educational needs of students.

The advantages of Fairview over Pelican are its size (four additional classrooms) and the active neighborhood support system that has been key in helping the impoverished children of that area. This includes churches and retired neighbors. Another advantage of this site is its more central location.

The advantages of Pelican over Fairview are two. One is the Pelican's land space that would make it an ideal location, at some point, to build a new larger elementary school. There are 5.2 acres at Pelican vs. 2.6 acres at Fairview. The other reason one could argue keeping Pelican over Fairview is the cost of repair. Pelican's repair costs, according to DLR estimates, are about \$1.6 million less than Fairview's.

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This is the information the board has been processing and considering for almost two years. At their October 8th board meeting, they will make their decisions. Whatever choices are made, you can be assured that due diligence and extensive thought has gone into the study. Board members also have listened closely to the community throughout this process. The decision will be in the best interest of KFCS' students of today and those that will be attending our schools in the future.