

UPDATE: Plans to Close Haddam Elementary School Move Forward

by **Alan Aronow**

The August issue of the Bulletin featured a story about the future of Haddam Elementary School (HES). It was mentioned that a group of unhappy residents planned to add a local ballot initiative in November's upcoming election attempting to delay the Board of Education (BOE) from moving forward with the closing of HES in June 2019. Some believed that a public referendum should be held to determine which of RSD17's three elementary schools would close due to declining enrollment.

Those opposing the implementation of the BOE approved District Restructuring Plan claim the board failed to allow sufficient public input prior to its decision to close HES. The BOE contested those claims citing over a year's worth of PTO informational notices to parents and public hearings on the restructuring proposal.

According to Haddam Town Clerk Scott Brookes, there was no petition involving HES filed by the statutory September 6 deadline, therefore no questions about the closing of HES will be on the ballot in November.

What is the District Restructuring Plan?

On March 6, 2018, the BOE voted to implement a plan that will reduce the current five-school facility program to four schools. This will be accomplished by changing which grades will be taught at each of the four remaining school campuses.

Because Haddam-Killingworth Middle School (HKMS) will house two different schools in the new restructuring plan, the physical plant will likely be reorganized into semi-separate areas for students in the intermediate and middle school grade levels

Why Was This Restructuring Plan Necessary?

Enrollment in RSD17 schools has declined steadily since 2007/2008 when it peaked at 2,557 students. A few years back residents became increasingly more vocal seeking answers from the BOE on how it would control rising school budgets in the face of falling enrollment. This situation wasn't unique to RSD17 – it was happening statewide.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s school populations were on the rise in most Connecticut towns and many communities went on a borrowing spree to expand school capacity. Then, seemingly without warning, suburban student populations started to decline ten years ago.

Districts throughout the state began assessing the disconnect between the then accepted projections of future enrollment growth made by such organizations as NESDEC that were used to justify capacity expansion with the current reality of fewer and fewer students attending classes each new school year.

Many school districts, including RSD17, have been reluctant to make sweeping operational changes without first reaching a firm consensus that the observed decline in students was not just a brief lull in projected enrollment growth; a blip on the screen caused by the Great Recession and the negative impact it was having on Connecticut's housing and employment markets.

CURRENT PROGRAM

	GRADES	LOCATION
Elementary	K-4	HES
Elementary	K-4	BES
Elementary	K-4	KES
Middle	5-8	HKMS
High	9-12	HKHS



RESTRUCTURED PROGRAM

	GRADES	LOCATION
Primary	K-3	BES
Primary	K-3	KES
Intermediate	4-5	HKMS
Middle	6-8	HKMS
High	9-12	HKHS

In July 2016, the BOE established a Strategic Capital Planning Committee to determine if declining enrollment was the ‘new normal’ and if so, what action(s) the district should make to more efficiently utilize its financial resources and facilities.

One of the first things the committee did was to seek the help of Wesleyan University to provide due diligence regarding enrollment trends. A three-person team at Wesleyan, using advanced statistical tools and data such as birth and cohort survival rates, housing permits, property taxes, and other factors, concluded the district’s declining enrollment was not a fluke and would continue into the foreseeable future.

The most significant declines were observed at the elementary school grade levels (K-4) where enrollment was projected to fall to just 585 students by 2021—leaving a combined 936 vacant seats of classroom capacity at HES, Burr Elementary School (BES), and Killingworth Elementary School (KES).

RSD17 Elementary School Enrollment and Classroom Capacity			
	2010	2015	2021
	Actual Enrollment *	Actual Enrollment *	Enrollment Projected by Wesleyan *
Enrollment Grades K-4	955	757	585
Classroom Capacity	1521	1521	1521
Classroom Capacity Vacant	566	764	936
Occupancy Rate %	63%	50%	38%
Vacancy Rate %	37%	50%	62%

Classroom capacity without portables. Portables would add an additional 90 seats of capacity. Data from 2013 Report of the Condition of CT School Facilities from information submitted by RSD17. Enrollment from BOE reports and the 2021 projection prepared by Wesleyan University for the BOE Strategic Capital Planning Committee

* Without Pre-Kindergarten.

The Wesleyan study provided compelling evidence to the BOE that one of the district’s three elementary schools needed to close. Once the board accepted that enrollment would continue to decline, the administration was tasked with recommending which school would be shuttered.

The decision to close HES was determined by evaluating the pros and cons of each school facility. The selection really came down between HES and BES since it was decided at the outset that Killingworth would retain its local elementary school facility. HES has advantages and disadvantages. Some argue that it is more conveniently located for many families and its closure will result in longer bus rides to and from school for young students. The building itself, while constructed in the 1940s, was renovated in 1989 and is directly on the town's major road. However, it has some comparative infrastructure shortcomings, the most significant being the lack of air-conditioning.

The school administration justified the choice of keeping BES open, citing that it was built in 1969 and the design is more architecturally and operationally up-to-date, with its library/media center, gymnasium, and main office at the center of the building and instructional spaces that radiate out from that core. Other justifications cited: the core area is air-conditioned with individual controls in each room; it has a better design for bus and parent drop-off and more parking; it is set further off the road making its campus and playgrounds quieter and safer; and it has more land available should future expansion be required.

Another factor considered was HES's prominent location in the center of Higganum, making it relatively more attractive and marketable for future commercial or residential redevelopment. The current assessment of the 29,287-square-foot building and the 155-acre site is set at almost \$4.5 million dollars.

The BOE claims its decision to close HES will save an estimated \$1 million annually in operating expenses, but no specific details have yet been provided to confirm those savings. This has troubled some residents who question if there will be any significant savings, and if not, why bother closing HES? In response, the BOE says that stretching its capital budget, special educational staff, and other resources over five school campuses rather than four—in the face of steady declines in enrollment—is inherently inefficient. It also stated that an accurate forecast of savings from closing HES will be available when it prepares its fiscal year 2019/2020 budget in a few months.

Next Steps - Implementing the Restructuring Plan

Closing a school and relocating students is a complex task. According to Dr. Holly Hageman, RSD17's Assistant Superintendent, the district established two committees comprised of the director of student services, principals, teachers, special education personnel, guidance counselors and parents; one for the primary school (K-3) and one for the new intermediate school (4-5). These committees met weekly over the summer to begin developing the new intermediate grade program, and review required changes in the physical plant, staffing, transportation, and technology.

Dr. Hageman said that during the months of September and October the Intermediate Planning Committee, now consisting of 32 members, will focus on the needs of 4th and 5th graders including the instructional model, specials offerings, extracurricular program, student support services, school culture, lunch, and recess protocols.

Once these program design aspects are in place, the administration will develop the associated staffing plan in time for the upcoming budget season. Dr. Hageman said that

while their goal is to create a program uniquely suited for the Haddam-Killingworth school community, the transition committees will incorporate ideas from other Connecticut intermediate schools, as well as best practices from schools across the country.

At the same time that the district's transition team prepares to implement the restructuring plan, the BOE's Strategic Capital Planning Committee has been working on plans for HES's future, particularly how to market the property for sale. According to committee member Peter Sonski, three commercial real estate firms from the region were invited to share their assessments of the local property market and prospects for the sale and repurposing of Haddam Elementary School.

Sonski added that the BOE is "aware and respectful of the town's desire to see an appropriate redevelopment of the school building—one that complements, even enhances, the charm and appeal of Higganum Village and the revitalization of the business district." Sonski also said that the BOE has approved the issuance of requests for proposals (RFP) to solicit proposals from investors to redevelop the property.

School officials have stated that responsible stewardship of HES's building and grounds is a top priority. Plans are now being made to secure and maintain the property after the current school year ends in June, if it is still owned by RSD17.

As of press time there have been no offers to buy the HES property.

Updates about the restructuring plan will be available at the district's website: RSD17.org.

Board of Selectmen Notes on HES

At the September 10 board of selectmen meeting, First Selectman Lizz Milardo read a letter she received from the Board of Education (BOE) in response to a town request regarding their plans for the HES building.

"...we have not yet determined a sale price. We are evaluating the best way to arrive at that figure and will advise you as soon as we have a Board approved solution," the letter stated. "That could be as early as September and should also help guide us to a decision on whether the building and grounds will be sold separately."

"...our Strategic Capital Planning Committee determined the cost to RSD 17 to be in the area of \$75,000, but be advised that does not include expenses that are covered elsewhere in the District budget: insurance, maintenance and custodial staff expenses, etc.," it continued.

For the supporters who showed up at board of selectmen meetings wanting to keep HES open as an elementary school, the BOE's response was blunt:

"We would like to reiterate that the RSD 17 Board of Education has made its decision to close HES and it will no longer be part of District 17 once a new owner has acquired it. As the current owner, RSD 17 is moving forward to identify possible future owners, including the Town of Haddam."

No formal decision has been made by the town yet. While First Selectman Milardo is not in favor of the town taking ownership, she has promised to hold a public hearing on the subject in the near future.