



Community Information on School Closure | December 18, 2008
Written questions submitted by attendees

- 1. According to Section 11 of Resolution No. 45-0809, approved at the Board's Dec. 10 meeting, the project to construct and renovate Castro Elementary to replace Portola Middle School is not "Pending" but in process. Therefore, how can Scenario 2 be under consideration? Portola should not be considered for closure if the Board has approved rebuilding it at the Castro site.**

Answer: Throughout the process of identifying Castro as the site for the middle school in El Cerrito, community members who oppose this site have threatened legal action. If that legal action were successful, the district could not put a middle school at Castro and thus, could consider closing Portola and re-distributing those students to other middle schools as well as to K-8 schools that could be authorized.

- 2. Under the consolidation Criteria #1, Facility Condition, does the sentence "This would include the facilities in the various planning stages of Measure J" mean such school facilities would be considered for closure, or would not be considered for closure?**

Answer: The criterion as written was unclear. It should read: **Facility Condition.** Conditions include all items of the physical plant, playgrounds, accessibility and grounds. Only school facilities not previously modernized or recently constructed will be considered for closure. Excluded facilities include the schools in the various planning stages of Measure J.

- 3. Regarding the School Closure Committee, please clarify how the committee members are chosen, and the whole process for these committee meetings.**

Answer: The School Closure Committee process is described in detail at: [Closure - Criteria & Process](#)

- 4. Since Grant Elementary is at 73.2% enrollment capacity, which is second lowest only to Downer, is it more likely that the school would be closed or that other students would fill our school from other closed schools.**

Answer: Grant is not listed as one of the schools in either scenario presented at the December 18 meeting. While closing Grant is a possibility, it is more likely that other students would be moved to Grant.

- 5. Using projected enrollment data in the De Anza Family Facility Inventory it shows 2 of the 3 (elem.) schools currently discussed as possibly being closed are projected to have the largest enrollment over time.**
Olinda = 535 projected enrollment
Valley View = 419 projected enrollment

Response: This comment brings up an essential element in projecting enrollment: should the district project by the number of residence or by the enrollment for the last five years. While Olinda currently has 361 students, only 224 live within the Olinda attendance area. Similarly, only 166 of the 408 students who attend Valley View live in that attendance area. The dilemma for the closure committee and ultimately the Board is to decide which of two values is more important in closing schools – neighborhood schools or choice for parents.

6. Declining enrollment could potentially be reduced by improving quality of education in middle schools or offering a K-8 solution. What is the number of students who transfer from the district?

Answer: 879 including renewal and new out-of-district permits for 2008-09.

7. Are the criteria listed in order of importance or as a list?

Answer: No, the criteria are not listed in the order of importance. The Board did not discuss or give direction that one criteria was more important than another.

8. Does your criteria attempt to measure the number of families you may lose due to school closures (e.g. family sending kids to private school or moving out of district)?

Answer: No. That would be a difficult projection and data from the last time the district closed several schools (the 1980's) is not available. Given the state and national economic trends, the thinking is that the public schools will gain enrollment as families are unable to continue to pay for tuition to private schools.

9. Please define “Qualified Certification of first Interim” (p.4). Please explain “2009-10 “Effective Negative COLA” (p.5).

Response: A ‘qualified certification’ is based on financial projections for the next two school years, 2009-10 and 2010-11, and means that the district may not have the money to pay its bills and fulfill its financial obligations for the next two years. The COLA is the cost of living allowance and is set by statute as a percentage that is added to per pupil funding to provide for increases in district expenditures due to rising costs for staffing, materials, utilities etc. A negative COLA is a reduction in per pupil allowance – in essence giving the district less money to deal with rising costs.

10. What is CEQA? Please explain the difference between when it does and does not apply in the school closure process.

Answer: CEQA is the California Environmental Quality Act. School closure is Categorical Exempt from CEQA. But CEQA studies must be completed when, as a result of enrollment shifts, a school needs to add 10 classrooms or increase capacity by 25% - whichever is less.

11. What is the “Kennedy Education Center”? Where will Kennedy students go? Why would you consider “two scenarios” that contain 3 of the same schools - that’s not 2 scenarios?

Answer: Kennedy High is included in both scenarios for closure. In one scenario Kennedy students would be re-districted to El Cerrito and Richmond (and Richmond students to DeAnza). Rather than sell the Kennedy building and property, this scenario would bring Leadership Public Charter School and other district programs such as adult education or continuation programs on to the Kennedy campus. In the other scenario, Kennedy High would remain as a small high school with targeted programs. Other programs such as Leadership Public Charter School would be housed in the Kennedy building.

12. Can WCCUSD sustain lifetime benefits?

Answer: The only way to sustain lifetime health benefits for the long term is for the state or federal governments to take over health insurance. The benefits for those who are already retired cannot be changed. Many staff are already ‘vested’ in the health benefit system and have stayed in WCCUSD under the belief that they, too, would have lifetime health benefits. The cost of the pay-as-you-go approach for lifetime benefits has grown to more than \$15 million for 2008-09 and will grow to \$27 million by 2015-16. The unfunded liability of the lifetime health benefits exceeds \$725 million.

13. Of the list of schools closed in the early 80’s – example Seaview, how many of these are still properties that the district owns? Can’t you sell off these properties before closing schools now in order to sell off new properties?

Answer: The district owns several of the properties that were used for schools back when district enrollment peaked in the late 1960’s. The role of education has expanded greatly since then. In the 1960’s there was no special education and no adult education. Both programs take up significant space in schools and in delivering services to schools. Yet, the district must sell property and the proceeds from the sale of property must (by law) go toward paying off the debts from the early 1990’s. Closing schools saves operating expenses – which are annual. Sale of property provides one-time revenues.

14. Would combining secondary schools lead to more violence on school campuses and more gang activity?

Answer: Providing safe and violence free schools is always the highest priority of the school district. Whenever two populations of students who aren’t normally in the same school come together there is a higher potential for violence. Yet, we do combine students from many schools in our summer school program every year. With appropriate deployment of police officers, campus supervisors and school administrators, we’ve been able to keep our campuses safe. We’d take extra safety precautions if two secondary schools were combined, especially at the beginning. We know we can make our schools

safe places for our students. We have and will expel students who can't behave appropriately at our schools.

15. What other creative financial remedies can be implemented other than the sale, consolidation and closures of school properties?

Answer: The district's approach to the current financial crisis is to take a balanced approach to maintaining financial solvency including school closure, sale of property to pay down the debt from the early 1990's, capping benefits for employees and retirees, and making cuts to staffing, programs and services. No one of those actions would be sufficient by itself (see the Superintendent's Message for January 2009 for details).

16. Currently students transfer from Stege to Castro. Some, or all, of these transfers are under No Child Left Behind, which gives parents of students at Stege the Federal right to transfer out (Stege is a 5-year Performance Improvement School). Closing Castro and sending some Castro students to Stege will result in more transfers out of Stege, and the predicted student population at Stege will not materialize.

Response: The premise of this statement is incorrect. More students live in the Castro attendance area and attend Stege than live in the Stege attendance area and attend Castro. For the 2008-09 school year, 66 students who live in the Castro attendance area attend Stege and 19 students who live in the Stege attendance area attend Castro.

17. Closing Olinda in order to sell the land may not work. Most of the parcel is a City of Richmond Public Park created, I believe, as an accommodation to Carl Dame when he developed The Carriage Hills Development on Castro Ranch. There is, I believe, an unrecorded agreement between Dame, the city and the district concerning the use of that part of the parcel. If so, sale of the parcel, or any part of it, may be impossible or impracticable.

Response: The entire Olinda property is owned by the West Contra Costa Unified School District. For many years, the Richmond recreation department has used the property during non-school hours.

18. My grandchild goes to Olinda, first grade. If the school closes, is she sent to another school by our choice or the school district's choice? Can she still transfer? Do we have a choice of which school she gets sent to?

Answer: When schools close, students who lived in those attendance areas will be assigned to attend other schools. Parents will have the option to transfer their students to other schools as space permits.

19. Is there a financial positive for going K-8? If not, why are we even considering it?

Answer: School districts that have moved into a K-8 model with middle school programs offered in the K-8 schools, have found that K-8 schools are more costly to operate. The premise of creating K-8 schools in WCCUSD is that they would be cost neutral – that is, they would not add operating costs but would have fewer programs and electives than regular middle schools.

20. If you promote K-8, where are we going to find the teachers? We don't even have enough math and science teachers in our middle schools now.

Answer: The district will use multi-subject certified teachers to teach 7th and 8th graders in K-8 schools because single subject teachers would be too hard to find.

21. Is QEIA funding attached to the school or the students?

Answer: QEIA (Quality Educational Investment Act) funds are attached to the school. The district currently has 8 schools with these funds: Richmond High, DeAnza High, Kennedy High, Helms Middle, Nystrom Elementary, Peres Elementary, Stege Elementary, and Harding Elementary.

22. What will happen to students who are on transfer?

Answer: Students who are transfer permits to schools that are closed will be re-assigned to their neighborhood schools. Parents may request a transfer to any school that is not full.

23. What were the criteria used to decide which schools would become K-8?

Answer: Schools that were proposed as possible K-8 all have excess capacity within the current school, or have the acreage to add portable classrooms to the site and have reasonable access to allow for additional traffic flow.

24. Do you plan to sell property in a “down” real estate market? How much could we expect? Why not renovate and rent? Once those assets are lost we don't get a second chance.

Answer: Closed school sites and other district property may need to be set aside for sale rather than selling in a ‘down’ real estate market. The district has engaged a property appraisal firm to determine the market value for each property. There is no money to renovate and rent property. It is not usually good practice for school districts to sell property, but the district has no choice because of the financial crisis.

25. What happens to the staff and principal at a closed school? If the closed school has a better record (scores, attendance, behavior) will the 2 schools be fused or will the culture of the lower ranked school take culture precedence?

Answer: Principals and teachers will be transferred to other schools. Every effort will be made to ensure that the culture of success becomes the way of business for every school.

26. How long have you known this crisis was going to happen?

Answer: No one foresaw the national financial collapse or the huge shortfalls in state revenues that resulted in the financial situation of the West Contra Costa School District being so imperiled. However, there have been two reports over the last six years that showed that the district needed to close schools and cap employee health benefits. The more recent of those is the MGT report which can be found at: [MGT America](#).

27. It doesn't seem fair that the Hercules group gets to vote when none of their schools are closing.

Response: The process was developed and approved by the Board in public meetings. The underlying premise is that all community members should be included in addressing these difficult decisions. Hercules residents are voters and taxpayers who will be impacted by decisions even if schools in Hercules are not closed.

28. What is the plan for future budgeting processes to prevent repeated fiscal irresponsibility?

Answer: No one foresaw the national financial collapse or the huge shortfalls in state revenues that resulted in the financial situation of the West Contra Costa School District being so imperiled. The district has had a positive financial position for more than 14 years after the district went into state receivership in the early 1990's. However, there have been two reports over the last six years that showed that the district needed to close schools and cap employee health benefits. The more recent of those is the MGT report which can be found at: [MGT America](#).

29. How can school/district employees, community members/leaders, and students work on behalf of the school board to plead for funding from all available resources to avoid any school closures?

Answer: Closures can't be avoided any longer. State funding is not adequate to continue operating schools that are much smaller than schools in other districts. Larger schools operate more efficiently and to remain financially viable the district must close schools.

30. Why do the proposals total \$3.4 million in annual savings, when the goal is \$3 million? Doesn't that mean one of the elementary schools doesn't need to close? (The annual cost for elem. schools was given as \$300,000.)

Answer: Both scenarios are proposals that will be improved as the community provides better ideas and strategies. The state fiscal crisis will drive the district toward closing the maximum number of schools rather than the minimum.

31. How is school capacity determined?

Answer: The State determines school enrollment capacity by the total space in square feet for each building. This tends to provide a larger number than can actually fit into a school. For the purposes of school closures, the district is using the number of students who attended that school over the last fifteen years as the total capacity number. One of the assumptions of this process is that in order to close schools, portable classrooms may need to be added at some sites.

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