

School inequality appalls Quakertown committee

18 May 2016 — The Intelligencer

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer

Members of the committee studying the need for upgrades in Quakertown school facilities expressed shock at the disparity among schools.

'It's almost painful to see the difference between Pfaff and QE,' said Jon Roth, comparing Quakertown and Pfaff elementary schools, built 77 years apart. 'I winced when I walked through the building. I can't get my mind around that.'

Roth's comments were in response to a question posed by Quakertown school board President Paul Stepanoff, who asked members of the Community Facilities Study Committee what surprised them the most.

Beth Basile said students attending Strayer and Milford middle schools have 'a completely different experience.'

Sandi Frisch said children in some schools are forced to learn in a hallway 'with people walking behind you. It's distracting and loud, and they haven't learned the skills to block that out yet.'

The conversation took place Tuesday night in the District Services Center, the first of four meetings between the committee and members of the school board and administration to develop priorities for the needed work.

The committee developed 19 options for a facilities master plan, and presented its top choice to the school board last month. It would cost \$112.1 million and turn Quakertown Elementary School into a districtwide kindergarten center.

Tohickon Valley Elementary and Milford Middle School would close and be sold under the plan. A new elementary/middle school with a shared gymnasium and cafeteria would be built on West Pumping Station Road. The school would cost \$66 million, part of the overall \$112.1 million cost, minus the money collected from the sales of Tohickon and Milford.

The report also advises establishing ongoing annual investment to catch up on repairs and capital improvements to district facilities.

The top four schools of the 13 in need of work are Quakertown Elementary (\$13.6 million), Tohickon Valley (\$10.9 million), Milford Middle School (\$10.9 million) and Neidig Elementary (\$10.4 million).

The schools' HVAC systems are running out of steam, need new roofs, floor replacement, work to meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards and building code upgrades among several other items.

The high school is undergoing a \$72 million renovation project.

Both the administration and board members have said their predecessors were lax in maintaining facilities. Tuesday night, board member Stephen Ripper, chairman of the Facilities Committee, said in the past several decades school boards 'looked at education through teachers. Teachers, rightfully, were getting bigger contracts while ignoring the facilities. They forgot that buildings were part of a good education.'

Stepanoff went further, saying 'we have to change the culture of a dollar not spent on labor is a frivolous dollar spent.' He said the history has been 'Boy, you're spending money on ... now you can pay us even more. We have a good professional staff, but we also have to make sure we have great buildings, great facilities.'

'You can't be putting all the money in one area and restrict the other,' Ripper said.

Stepanoff told the committee 'There is hope to do this. We have to be very disciplined on how we do this.'

At next Tuesday's meeting, Ripper asked the committee to consider ways to solve the parity issue and for the best ways to 'spend our dollars.'