



QUAKERTOWN COMMUNITY SCHOOL BOARD WINTER NEWSLETTER

February, 2018

Neidig expanding, Tohickon Valley closing

The Quakertown Community School Board is moving forward with plans for a complete renovation and expansion of Neidig Elementary School, along with the closing of Tohickon Valley Elementary School in June.

The Board accepted the recommendation of the Elementary Reassignment Committee to renovate Neidig and reassign TVES students, by neighborhood, to Neidig, Pfaff, Quakertown and Trumbauersville elementaries.

The committee's recommendation falls in line with the 2016 Facilities Study, which cites the Neidig upgrades as a key step toward investing in repairs and upgrades of district facilities. The commitment is shared by both the Board and Administration after years of neglect to district buildings.

Neidig, located on Penrose Street, sits in both Quakertown Borough and Rich-



land Township. It's approximately 45,000 square feet and has a student body of 403. Plans, which are currently being developed, call for the new Neidig to handle 600 students.

It's expected the design process and land development approvals will take one year. Bidding on the jobs would be done from January-March 2019, followed by construction from March 2019

to December 2020. Classrooms would be available for Neidig students for the spring semester of 2021, with redistricting taking place in the fall of 2021.

Built in 1958, Neidig was partially renovated in 1987. The new renovation, which will bring the school into compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, and an addition is estimated to cost more than \$20 million.

"We will use money here prudently," Superintendent Bill Harner said. "We will get the most value out of the space we have rather than make it aesthetically pleasing. The new Neidig will be functional and have quality classroom space."

The closing of TVES means an annual savings of \$1.77 million. There is also an \$8.4 million cost avoidance identified

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The Board's 9: New leadership, 4 new members

Four new members took their seats on the Quakertown Community School Board on Dec. 7, as Magisterial District Justice Robert Roth gave the oath of office to Keith Micucci, Kaylyn Mitchell, David Ochmanowicz and Jennifer Weed.

Steaven Klein was unanimously named President while Austin Sedicum won a 5-4 vote to become vice president.

"The existing board comes in with its philosophy and the four new members come in with their philosophy," Klein said. "It's important for me is to find common ground, build consensus and get things done. It's all about giving the kids the best education they can get."

Klein was appointed to the Board in March, 2015, following the resignation of Anna Cattie. He has lived in Quakertown since 1988, and had his three children go through the school district. He is a national sales manager with Austin Hardware.



Following the Dec. 7 reorganization meeting, the Quakertown Community School Board includes, from left, Ron Jackson, Keith Micucci, Dwight Anderson, Jennifer Weed, President Steaven Klein, Kaylyn Mitchell, David Ochmanowicz Jr., Jonathan Kern and vice President Austin Sedicum.

"I'm looking forward to the next year," he said. "I'm excited with what the administration is doing. We're getting better with curriculum. The number of kids in Advanced Placement classes is steadily growing. We're doing fantastic things, and I'd like to see them continue."

Klein was referring to the recent announcement that QCSD made the AP District Honor Roll for the fourth year in a row. This year, Quakertown is the only Bucks County District on the list.

Sedicum, the Board's new vice president, has a podiatry practice in Quakertown. He has been on the Board since Dec. 2015.

Besides the Board's leadership and new members, directors include Dwight Anderson, Ron Jackson and Jonathan Kern.

Former member Robert Smith did not seek reelection while President Paul Stepanoff, vice president Charles Shermer and Stephen Ripper were defeated at the polls.

Finding \$: 2018-19 budget woes

While the closing of Milford Middle School and Tohickon Valley Elementary improved the financial shape of the Quakertown Community School District, the 2018-19 budget has a \$3 million shortfall.

Without the Board's decision to shut-down Milford last summer and TVES this coming June, the red ink would have hit \$7 million, according to Austin Sedicum, the Board's vice president and chairman of the Finance Committee.

Rising special education and retirement costs helped drive the deficit, he said, "offsetting the savings from redistricting. ... In hindsight it was the right thing to do. Unfortunately, we have a commitment to buy things we didn't order."

He was referring to mandated expenses, which local school boards can't control.

Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner presented the preliminary budget to the Board on January 25. It is scheduled to be considered at the Board's February 8 meeting. The \$110.55 million spending plan has revenues of \$107.54 million.

For the first time in Harner's four years as superintendent, the Board has given him the flexibility to increase taxes above the limits of Act 1, the state's

property tax law. QCSB's Act 1 index is 2.8 percent. With exceptions for retirement and special education costs, however, the levy could rise 6.04 percent.

The Administration is considering a 4.2 percent increase, though Board support in June could be a tough get.

The January 25 vote to not seek exceptions lost 5-4, with directors Ron Jackson, Keith Micucci, Kaylyn Mitchell, David Ochmanowicz Jr. and Jennifer Weed choosing not to tie Harner's hands this early in the budget season.

Board President Steaven Klein, Dwight Anderson, Jonathan Kern and Sedicum sought to limit the levy.

"Why do we have to limit ourselves tonight," Weed said.

"In an ideal world we all would love no tax increase. ... I don't know why we would limit our options" Mitchell said.

Harner is pushing for a line item of \$1 million for capital projects. Last year's Facilities Study Report by the Schrader Group identified several buildings in poor condition that called for a total of \$1 million in fixes. The Board also recently learned that the roof at Trumbauersville Elementary School needs roof work, a \$675,000 project.

"The Administration is requesting 4.2 percent. I believe that is a worst case scenario," Harner said. That gives \$1 million for capital expenses. ... We are not recommending the maximum 6 percent."

During Harner's presentation, which can be found at qcsd.org, he said if the Board didn't raise taxes this year, it would leave the budget with a fund balance of *minus* \$14.3 million in 2023. The district's current fund balance sits

Funding Priorities

Capital Maintenance: \$1 million, General Fund

Renovation/Addition: Neidig Elementary School, Debt Service

Additional Special Ed Supports:

- Teacher on special assignment to support Pfaff Elementary
- Additional aide supports
- Senior High School Assistant Principal (Special Education Focus)

at \$10.9 million.

This year's cost drivers include a \$1.1 million bump in special education and an \$828,316 increase in healthcare costs.

Sedicum said that with special ed funding approaching \$20 million "you look to see if you can replace redundancies. It's important as it's now exceeding PSERS as the number two driver. ... We have some agonizing choices we have to make the next couple of months, ... I don't know how much more juice Dr. Harner can get out of this orange."

Said Kern, "It's obvious that our expenditures continue to outpace our revenues. Most businesses don't survive like that. So we have a rock and a hard place and a piece of granite between the two. ... I don't know how it's even possible to make this ship float."

A 4.2 percent tax increase would boost the average tax bill by \$174, compared to a \$116 increase for a 2.8 percent increase.

"Please make it so we're not in the position to have to raise taxes above Act 1," Ochmanowicz said.

"Acknowledged," Harner responded.

QCSD Mission

Our mission is to prepare all students with the knowledge, habits and skills they need to graduate ready for college or career and for engaged citizenship, all at the best value to our community.

About this newsletter

The Quakertown Community School Board plans to send out a quarterly newsletter to inform residents of important issues in the district. The Board meets at the District Services Center, 100 Commerce Drive, at 7 p.m. on the second and fourth Thursday of each month — with the exception of July. Members can be reached at board@qcsd.org.

Stories in this newsletter were written by Gary Weckselblatt, the district's director of communications. He can be reached at 215-529-2028 or gweckselblatt@qcsd.org.

Neidig

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in the Facilities Plan. In addition, sale of the property could bring a \$1.5 million infusion to the district.

The reassigning of students from TVES will raise average class sizes across QCSD to 23 students, while construction is done at Neidig over the next 2½ years. When the work on Neidig is complete, the Board plans to conduct a district-wide reassignment process to lower class sizes back again to about 21 students.

The plans recommended by the committee expect to meet district space needs for at least five years. Future plans for the eventual construction of a new elementary school on district property along Pumping Station Road, could also potentially lower class size.

The TVES closing follows the shuttering of Milford Middle School, part of a strategy to cut into a \$4.7 million structural deficit.

With Milford empty and TVES set to follow in June, the Board is considering razing the buildings.

No school on MLK Day in 2019

Board president: “I think this is the best decision for us to make.”

Students and teachers will not be in class on Martin Luther King Jr. Day next year.

At the recommendation of the Administration, the Quakertown Community School Board on Jan. 25 voted unanimously to remove the federal holiday as an Emergency Makeup Day, though district offices will be open. Instead, if needed, a student day will be added to the end of the 2019 school year in June.

The issue arose when the district was criticized in the media for having school on the January 15 King holiday to makeup for a January 5 snow day. Comments on a Philly.com column and emails sent to the district made an impact on the Board's 9-0 vote.

“All of us took the reaction to heart, and did a lot of thinking about this,” said Steaven Klein, the Board president, who urged members to vote to remove the holiday as a makeup day option. “I think this is the best decision for us to make.”

School officials saw the day as an opportunity to provide quality instruction to each of its 5,400 students about the life, philosophy, and social impact of MLK, America's Preeminent Civil Rights Leader.

“In my 20 years in public education, I have never seen or heard about a district totally focusing on one topic on the same day,” Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner said. “The feedback from students, teachers, and parents indicated that it was a wonderful and meaningful day!”

Indeed, director Keith Micucci said his children “came home (from school) more knowledgeable than when they left” regarding King's positive impact on society. “But if it offends even 5 percent of our community, I think we should respect that.”

While he voted for the measure, Ron Jackson spoke out against the criticism the district has received, and referenced the Oct. 6 incident, where two Strayer Middle School students shouted racial slurs at Cheltenham High School cheerleaders during a football game at Alumni



Richland Elementary students dedicated a hallway wall to Martin Luther King Jr., and wrote their own dream.

Field.

Jackson said the Board shouldn't feel pressured to “kowtow to those people who are not from this community, and act in a certain manner and way that they wish us to act because they look at us differently because of the actions of the few. Suddenly because of the incident back in October, this community is a racist community because we chose to have school on that day.

“Unfortunately, because some people outside this community felt offended, who have nothing to do with this community, this board is forced in a manner to change its schedule, to dissipate the appearance of a truth that isn't a truth, and that offends me to an exceptional degree.”

Jackson said if the district held a day of service, “The vast majority of students will not attend any events we hold. They're not. They're going to stay home or go out with their friends.”

Yet on MLK Day in QCSD, “People actually got engaged and learned about Martin Luther King Jr.”

Board Members David Ochmanowicz Jr. and Kaylyn Mitchell proposed making the King holiday a day of service.

“This is a great opportunity,” Ochmanowicz said. “There are so many different needs in our community.”

He proposed the district designate a place on its website, QCSD.org, to provide student focused opportunities in the community to “give back for the greater good.” The opportunities would be voluntary.

Harner said the district will build a program with the Board's support.

Since the Oct. 6 incident, the district has taken several steps to combat racism.

The School Board and Administration signed up for a system-wide diversity and inclusion initiative with the Pearl S. Buck Foundation. In “The Welcome Workplace Program,” 400 district employees and the School Board will undergo Intercultural Competency Assessments. Professional trainers and staff will work with district leadership and stakeholders to build individual and group intercultural competency.

The Peace Center, a social justice organization, was brought in to teach its curriculum of diversity and acceptance to middle school students and fourth graders.

“I can't express enough how important this is,” Klein said of the initiatives. “I'm

excited about the opportunities in front of us, and this is just the first step.”

Klein and Harner held a dinner at Strayer with the parents of African-American students to hear their concerns and explain the district's plans moving forward.

Student leaders

from Strayer sent a video to Cheltenham as a way to apologize and show the district's true character. The high school's Spirit Council met with Cheltenham students.

And on the King holiday, reverence for iconic figure was heard throughout the district. At Strayer Middle School, Principal Derek Peiffer used his morning announcement to talk of King's legacy.

“He preached that we should stand up to injustice, but do so in a peaceful manner,” Peiffer said. “He spoke about looking at a person for who they are and not what they look like.”



Juan Soto's Spanish Honors class discussed MLK's “I Have a Dream” speech. Soto asked students what their dreams are, both for the school and the nation.

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QCSD achieves AP District Honor Roll status for 4th year in a row

The Quakertown Community School District was recognized in December by the College Board for continuing to make significant gains in student access and success on Advanced Placement tests.

QCSD is one of 447 school districts in the U.S. and Canada to qualify for the Eighth Annual AP® District Honor Roll. Each year since 2015, the district has increased the number of students participating in AP while also expanding the percentage of students earning AP Exam scores of 3 or higher. Reaching these goals shows that each year more highly motivated, academically prepared Quakertown students are ready for college level coursework.

"We're thrilled with the results of our students for several reasons," QCSD Superintendent Bill Harner said. "Our primary goal is to make sure our students are college and career ready when they graduate. The overwhelming evidence of that achievement is their performance on a nationally recognized college level AP exam."

Harner praised the incredible efforts of teachers and students for the District's success and thanked parents and the community at large for supporting the School Board's

college and career readiness initiatives.

Since the spring of 2014, the number of AP courses offered by the District has increased from 17 to 24, with two more – German and Studio Art – scheduled to be added next year. With 26 AP courses now available, every college bound student has a long list of courses options to choose from.

Over the past four years, student enrollment in AP courses has grown by 50 percent, while at the same time the number of exams taken and passed has nearly doubled. Part of those increases are due to the introduction of AP course options in ninth grade, where about 20 percent of Quakertown students are taking the college level coursework. Once in college, research has found that AP students outperform their non-AP peers, according to a 2015 report "Are AP® Students More Likely to Graduate from College on Time?"

High school English teacher Rachel Girman said AP courses "offer a rigorous curriculum written by our great teachers, and those

courses help students develop even stronger critical thinking skills, building off of what they've been taught before. We encourage students to challenge themselves, and we do everything in our power to help them succeed amid those challenges. It's not just the AP teachers - it's the whole K-12 staff working together to help students succeed in the world beyond high school. Participating in AP courses is definitely part of that success."

In 2018, with well over 150 Quakertown students expected to take three or more exams, and an individual exam cost of \$94, exam fees can be problematic. So, the Board decided to reimburse parents for their students' successes. For every exam successfully passed, after the first exam, QCSD will reimburse parents. For AP exams taken last spring, Quakertown parents were reimbursed \$20,782.

"With 34 percent of our student body on free or reduced lunch in 2017-18," Harner said, "we want to make sure the cost of an AP exam does not prevent students from taking and excelling on the exam, especially students taking multiple AP courses."

