With taxes rising, parents, students express concern with changes coming to Quakertown schools

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer

The Quakertown Community School District will merge seventh- and eighth-graders into one middle school, shift all sixth-graders to the freshman center and move ninth-graders to the high school as part of a plan to eliminate a structural deficit of $4.7 million in the next two years.

The district also could eliminate its cyber program, which more than 300 students use for at least one course.

The moves, discussed at a sometimes emotional 3½-hour school board meeting last week, were part of the 2017-18 Proposed Final Budget of $109.2 million. The budget raises taxes 2.9 percent — about $117 for owners of properties assessed at the district median of $26,308 — and requires the use of $3.15 million in district savings to balance.

Eliminating the cyber program would save nearly $500,000. Consolidating the middle schools would save more than $1 million, said Superintendent William Harner. And if Milford Middle School is officially closed by the board in July, that would mean $1 million less is needed from district savings. If Tohickon Valley Elementary School is closed the following year — a decision could be made in August — that would save another $1 million, essentially eliminating the structural deficit.

"We believe we could end the structural deficit in two years," Harner said.

Board members, who supported the budget in an 8-1 vote, blasted lawmakers in Harrisburg for "being remiss in their duties" to address the pension crisis, which they claimed is the primary reason for the district's economic problems.
"PSERS is eating our lunch," Harner said of the Public School Employees' Retirement System, which the state and districts must fund with 32.57 percent of employee salaries next year.

School board President Paul Stepanoff, in the state capital last week for a Pennsylvania School Board's Association event, said Quakertown is in better shape than most districts. "This is actually good news. If you look around the state, things are much worse."

Facing an audience of mostly parents and teachers, he referenced area retirees without children in the schools. "Just ask anyone collecting a Social Security check what their (inflation) index is," he said. "Raising taxes 2.9 percent is significantly above inflation, and that's hurting a lot of people."

Vicky Callan, of Richland, who has two students in the district, said she was "extremely frustrated" that the district did not take a recommendation from Harner to raise taxes above the Act 1 index. Harner had suggested that the district seek an exception under Act 1 to raise taxes above 2.9 percent to help cover the costs of the district's pension contribution.

Callan, along with several parents, expressed concern that their children would receive fewer opportunities — especially in music-related programs — in a heavier-populated middle school.

Her son, one of 265 students at Strayer, now will be one of 442 if the school board elects to close Milford Middle School. "That's less of a chance to be part of a select ensemble," she said. "Middle school is not the time to be eliminating opportunities."

Students and parents also said they feared the loss of the cyber program.
"If you cut out the cyber program I will have to go back to live classes in which I did not do very well," said Devin Frisch, a seventh-grader at Milford Middle School. "It's a big help to me and all my fellow students."

Dawn Klein, of Haycock, whose son uses the cyber program for social studies and science, said "cyber learning is clearly an integral part of the 21st century learning environment. The elimination of the cyber program clearly will impact academics."

The district is working to reform the cyber program, but because of state regulations and its contract with the teachers union, the program must be eliminated, re-established and renamed, directors said.

"We have to contractually end the program to rebuild it," board member Austin Sedicum said. "The idea is to build it in a way where we can watch the budget a little more closely."

School board member Bob Smith, the lone vote against the budget, said he was concerned about cutting the cyber program. He also said many of the changes are "just something that should have been looked at sooner."

Assistant Superintendent Nancianne Edwards said she has met with the teachers union and plans to do so again in the hope that the program could be restarted in September.

The $109.2 million budget is nearly $5 million more than this year's spending plan. While most districts can raise taxes 2.5 percent, the index set by Act 1, the state's property tax law, Quakertown's index is 2.9 percent because of its higher poverty rate of 31 percent. Other Bucks districts with a higher index are Bristol Borough, Bristol Township and Morrisville — all above 3 percent.

The total school tax bill is $4,151 for the owner of a home assessed at the district median. The district's millage rises to 157.77. A mill translates to $1 in tax for every $1,000 of a property's assessed value.
School board member Dwight Anderson credits the district’s administration for "thinking outside the box" with its solutions.

"It's going to put us in position to be in a better place a year from now, two years from now, three years from now," school board member Steaven Klein said. "It’s not perfect. There are things people don't like. But for right now, it's the best plan that we’ve got."

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