For Kelly Housman and her daughter, Milford Middle School has been nothing short of a miracle.

Before Housman and her family moved into the Quakertown Community School District, her daughter, who contends with dyslexia, attended a school where she suffered bullying and academic struggles, and was ultimately diagnosed with depression.

But since moving into Milford and entering its middle school, Housman’s daughter has thrived, making honor roll four of seven semesters. Her depression has lifted. She feels part of things. She’s happy.

Housman has no doubt about why the turnaround occurred.
“It’s because of the Milford school community we’ve been blessed to move her into,” said Housman, characterizing that school community as warm, tight-knit and inclusive. “It has reignited her love of learning.”

And that’s a key reason why Housman asked the Quakertown Community school board on Tuesday to vote against a proposed shuttering of Milford Middle School for the coming school year.

Housman’s personal story was one of many emotional anecdotes, insights and even pleas that parents, teachers, district support staff and community members shared at a public hearing on the district’s proposed closure of the school.

Held at the District Services Center, the meeting was packed to capacity. Locals had formed a long line outside the building to ensure they could get a seat at least a half hour before the meeting was scheduled to start.

The school board is considering closing Milford Middle School to address a $4.7 million structural budget deficit.

Some community members lambasted the school board Tuesday evening, saying the district is in the poor financial condition because of their mismanagement.

“The real cause is poor fiscal planning,” said Robert Leight, a Richland resident and career professional educator who formerly served on the board for 27 years.

Quakertown resident Paul Solliday sounded a similarly critical note, accusing the board of “terrible mismanagement of financial resources” for spending on what he felt were unnecessary investments, such as a dance studio and digital sign.

“The impact of what you do continues to tear this community apart,” said Solliday.

Milford parent Dean Wackerman said the suddenness of the pending closure — unveiled last month — was a difficult blow.

“You dropped a bomb on this community and exploded us,” he said.

Wackerman doesn’t want Milford Middle School to close. But, should the board decide to proceed with a closure, he asked that the lights-out date be put off until at least the 2018-19 school year.

Many parents expressed the same sentiment, saying another year would give students and the community time to adjust to the new reality, while providing educators a chance to thoroughly plan for the transition.
“This school is the heart and soul of the community,” Wackerman said.

District teacher Ryan Wieand said one possible alternative would be to close Milford Middle School, but keep the students together by sending them to the Freshman Center, rather than tracking them all into Strayer Middle School with the current student population there. That could possibly help maintain social and educational continuity.

Under the plan, freshmen would attend the high school. Wieand opined that these and other potential alternatives had not been given adequate consideration.

Following Tuesday’s public hearing, the school board is legally obligated to wait three months before taking a final vote on whether or not to close the school.

That puts the vote in July — too close to the start of next school year for some parents. They said the timing exacerbates uncertainty and anxiety for students, parents, teachers and staff, some of whom could be out of a job if the closure proceeds.

Superintendent William Harner opened Tuesday’s meeting by saying the decision to close Milford School is painful and “personally tough.” Still, amid his study of the situation and directives of the school board, he feels it would be in the best interest of the school district.

“As we look at our system holistically, keeping our eye on the present and future experiences of our students, failure to close Milford Middle School has the potential of damaging not only their educational experience in Quakertown, but the educational experiences of other students,” Harner said. “Therefore, the option of closing Milford Middle School is an educational decision — a student-centered decision that will benefit all students in QCSD.”

Under the closure plan being considered, Milford Middle School’s sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders would move to Strayer Middle School for a combined Quakertown Community Middle School. The plan includes furloughs of up to 50 teachers, administrators and support staff.

If Milford students end up at Strayer, the district will build a $10.5 million addition with 12 classrooms by the 2018-2019 school year, Harner has said. Until then, the district will set up temporary modular buildings with fencing, security and overhead cover.

On Tuesday, the prospect of a combined community middle school also prompted parents to raise concerns about issues that included: longer bus rides for Milford students; less opportunity for students to participate in theatrical, musical, academic and sports programs because of increased competition for spots; and even diminished residential property values.
“Please,” Wackerman implored the board, “don’t close the school this year.”

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Chris Ruvo is a freelance writer. He can be reached through editor Harry Yanoshak at 215-345-3051 or hyanoshak@calkins.com.