Superintendent William Harner's plan to help relieve Quakertown Community School District from its economic plight does not sit well with families that would be affected by the closing of Milford Middle School.

Harner hosted a town hall meeting for the Milford community Monday night, giving the PowerPoint presentation he showed at a school board meeting in March and spending an hour answering written questions submitted by the crowd of about 300 people.

"It's too soon. This is not a well thought out plan," said Karen Keller, who has two seventh graders at Milford. "It's all numbers. Nothing is about the kids. I get that they have to make (the budget) work. But at some point you've got to look at faces. This is a forever change."

Melissa Comlinson, whose son will attend Milford next year if it remains open, said "it's clear that the board has already made its decision. This is a formality."

Harner said delaying his proposal is not an option "because that doubles the problem next year. Students do come first. We're dealing with a problem with finite dollars."

The district is dealing with a structural deficit of $4.7 million. He explained that a structural deficit is "something that is recurring unless you address it."

His proposal would cut 50 jobs and close two schools: Milford and either Tohickon Valley or Quakertown elementary schools. The district would save millions of dollars by
not having to care for the aging buildings. Tohickon Valley and Milford, for example, each need nearly $11 million in renovations. They have been appraised for nearly $2.2 million combined and could be sold or leased. Quakertown Elementary is a historic building, built in 1928.

The closing of Milford would save just over $1 million in annual operating costs. Harner offered three options for the students:

• Combine sixth- and seventh-graders at Strayer Middle School and move eighth-graders to the Freshman Center until a $12.5 million addition can be built at Strayer

• Move eighth-graders to the Freshman Center permanently

• Have students in grades six, seven and eight at Strayer use modular units until an addition is built

The savings would range from $8.8 million to $9.1 million. Another $40 million would be saved by not building a middle school, Harner said.

There are also options for elementary schools, including closing Quakertown, which would save $1.7 million a year plus $10.5 million in maintenance needs.

Tohickon Valley could also be closed, a $1.8 million annual savings plus $8.4 million that wouldn’t be spent on maintenance.

Harner's options would eliminate the cyber program, a savings of nearly $500,000. It has fewer than 15 full-time students, but nearly 300 students take at least one class. "Team Time" at the middle school would also be dropped. Teachers would then teach six classes instead of five, similar to the high school schedule.

Under Harner, the district has reduced staff through attrition. From a high of 625 full-time employees in 2007-08, the district would be at 501 employees in 2018-19 if the board follows the recommendations of Harner, who was hired three years ago.
While the average class size in Milford is, on average, 19 to 20 students, Harner said Monday night, Strayer's class size is between 24 and 25 students. Strayer's student population has a 38 percent poverty level, he said, compared with Milford, which is in the low 20s. The district overall is at 31 percent.

Harner said if the board closes Milford it would be consistent with its decision to close Haycock Elementary, which was given to Haycock Township last year.

"We gave away Haycock elementary because it was a money pit," Harner said.

Several parents didn't sound convinced.

"This school board and Dr. Harner have already made their decision and the children of the Quakertown school district are just a number to them," said Emily George, of Quakertown.

Said Elaine Barglik, also of Quakertown, "it's just clear they don't have the kids' best interest at heart."

Another meeting for the Strayer Middle School community is planned for Thursday night from 7 to 8:30.

A public hearing is scheduled for April 11 at 6:30 at the district's administration building.

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