Layoffs, school closings under consideration by Quakertown school board

A middle school and two elementary schools would be closed. The job losses would come through attrition over the next two years.

The Quakertown Community School District is considering closing three schools and eliminating nearly 50 jobs to cut a $4.7 million structural budget deficit and move forward with its facilities plan.

The jobs losses, which officials hoped could be made through attrition, would be felt over the next two years by teachers, administrators and support staff.

The schools targeted for closing are Milford Middle School and Quakertown and Tohickon Valley elementaries, "our three worst facilities," said Superintendent William Harner, who described those buildings as obsolete.

"Doing nothing puts us where we could have a catastrophic failure in our core programs in what we're going to be able to deliver in 2018-19," Harner said.

Harner, under orders from the school board to create a plan to get the budget in balance to allow borrowing to build an elementary and middle school, developed several options for the board to consider, including the consolidation of schools. His 37-page report, unveiled to the board and community Thursday night, saves millions that won't have to be spent on aging schools.

Tohickon Valley Elementary School and Milford Middle School, 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.

More than 125 people, many of them teachers, who crowded into the board meeting weren't happy with the possibilities.

Ryan Wiend, president of the Quakertown Community Education Association, said furloughing 40 teachers "would definitely impact programs. Some of those 40 include specialists who meet with our neediest students. To say it's not going to impact programs is not being truthful."

Harner maintained, however, that the only program recommended for elimination is the cyber program, which has fewer than 15 full-time students but nearly 300 students take at least one class in. The savings would be close to $500,000.

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

- Combine sixth and seventh graders at Strayer Middle School and move all eighth graders to the Freshman Center until a $12.5 million addition can be built at Strayer.
- Move the eighth-graders to the Freshman Center permanently.
- Have all students in grades six, seven and eight at Strayer use modulars until an addition is built at Strayer.

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

There are also options for elementary schools, including closing Qualkertown, 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.

"I have to act," Harner said. "We have to act or we'll definitely be losing student programs next year."

Enjoying our content? Become a subscriber to support stories like these. Get full access to our signature journalism for just 33 cents a day.

Gary Weckselblatt: 215-345-3169; email: gweckselblatt@calkins.com; Twitter: @gweckselblatt