Quakertown school officials, teachers, parents argue over school closings, furloughs and taxes

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer  Mar 27, 2017

Plans to cut 50 jobs and close three schools drew negative reaction from teachers and parents in the Quakertown Community School District, and it became a debate whether the school board was considering the needs of taxpayers over students.

Parental concerns over plans to close Milford Middle School and either Tohickon Valley or Quakertown elementary schools included more redistricting, having modular classrooms, busing children through the borough and the loss of middle school "Team Time," which they said was especially helpful to students with individualized education programs.

"The message I am hearing is that you are concerned about the taxpayers," said Andrea Leistd, a district parent. "I get it, but what about the kids?"

She was among 11 parents and four district employees who spoke for about 90 minutes during Thursday night's board meeting, attended by more than 125 people.

Superintendent William Harner, the architect of the plan to eliminate a $4.7 million structural budget deficit, said "doing nothing would be disastrous." He described the buildings that could close as the district's three worst facilities.

The board's only vote Thursday was to hold a public hearing to consider closing the middle school.

Both Harner and the board, which praised the proposal they asked Harner to develop, heard from angry educators fearful of potential furloughs.

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

Wieand asked directors to consider an early retirement incentive to provide openings for teachers through attrition. He also criticized the board for continually citing the rising cost of teacher retirements, and said they should have used exceptions to raise taxes above the index of Act 1, the state's property tax law.
"PSERS keeps coming up to blame," he said of the Pennsylvania Public School Employees' Retirement System. "Sometimes I think that's a deflection on your choices. You chose not raise (taxes) above the Act 1 index. ... It definitely would have helped (close the deficit)."

He also questioned spending on district vans and upgrades to the sports stadium's concessions stands and artificial turf field.

"You could tighten up on some of that spending before we look at cutting teachers," Wieand said.

Paul Stepanoff, the school board president, said taxes have been raised in each of his 11 years as a director.

"When you knock on the community's door, what do you hear? Don't raise our taxes. We're raising taxes at twice the rate of inflation, and that has a severe impact on them," Stepanoff said. "What we're hearing is when are you going to give us no tax increase?"

Stepanoff said the board is "perfectly willing to listen" to the union's thoughts on retirement incentives. But during the last negotiations, when the board brought up having teachers work one additional hour a month "you didn't want us to discuss it at all."

"I said, 'You're not respecting the time we're giving you beyond our day.'"

Charles Shermer, chairman of the finance committee, said "I will never apologize for watching the taxpayer dollar. It's not going to happen."

The Act 1 index for 2017-18 is 2.5 percent. However, because Quakertown's poverty rate is 31 percent, higher than most districts, the index rises to 2.9 percent. Other Bucks school districts with a higher index are Bristol Borough, Bristol Township, and Morrisville, all above 3 percent.

"Nobody here is blaming teachers for the PSERS problem. ... We're not saying the word PSERS to blame you for anything. That's the only item driving our budget up and up every year. ... We're going to keep on mentioning it because that's where our money is going," said Quakertown Community board member Ronald Jackson in response to moans and eye rolls of teachers each time PSERS was mentioned as a budgetary problem.

Nearly 33 percent of all school salaries go to the retirement fund. From 2011 to 2015, the state increased funding for schools by $1.35 billion. Pension costs, however, have risen $1.8 billion.

"We're asking our superintendent to make some hard decisions," Jackson continued. "And whether you like it or not, it's going to hurt because it's hurting our taxpayers."

Quakertown has raised taxes each year since 1972. "That's pathetic," he said.

Harner 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.

The closing of Milford would save just over $1 million in annual operating costs. Harner 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; or have all students in grades six, seven and eight at Strayer use modular units 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 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.

"This is the biggest reduction in costs I've seen in a while without reducing services," Shermer said.

In reality, 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.

When parents questioned the board’s priorities, Stepanoff cited improved student achievement, specifically the state’s School Performance Profile, where Quakertown Community High School topped all Bucks County schools.

"Our direction to the administration is clear: Do not cut programs," Stepanoff said. "We're expanding languages, built a dance studio. Our AP (advanced placement) program is bigger than any in Bucks County. ... Our focus is always the kids, always the programs."

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.

School psychologist Kevin Kelly said the elimination of teachers would create negative "educational consequences and they should be studied. ... They're going to have a long impact."

School officials, however, explained that after years of neglect to its buildings, the district has a long list of capital projects to address. Most of the heavy lifting was done last year by a Community Facilities Study Committee, a group of residents, board members and administrators who toured schools, reviewed data and came up with several options.

Its recommendation was a $66 million plan that would have made the aging buildings safe, warm and dry, but not add seats to a district deficient by 227 seats at the elementary and middle school levels.

Rather than do that, the district invested $1.8 million for 126 acres in Milford behind the Target store on Route 309.

The goal is to have a $46.6 million, 600-student elementary school built by 2021. A $36.6 million middle school was planned to be built alongside the new elementary school and share several components, including a cafeteria, gymnasium and auditorium.

If Harner's plan is passed by the board, that middle school won't be necessary.

"We're heading for a fiscal cliff," school director Dwight Anderson said. "That's all there is to it. The administration put together a heck of a study in a short time. ... You cannot ignore the fiscal problem in front of us."

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