

MEMORANDUM

TO: Cortland Facilities Study Advisory Committee

FROM: Alan Pole and Bill Silky

RE: Meeting Notes-Meeting of January 3, 2018

DATE: January 8, 2018

Attendance:

Committee Members: Breck Aspinwall, Anna Bennett, Susan Byrnes, Kevin Cafararo, Rick Gamel, Sister Harriett Hamilton, Lisa Kaup, Stephanie Mitchell-Madden, Amy Sundheim, Karen Williams, and Mark Yacavone

Consultants: Alan Pole and Bill Silky

Observers: Jeff Craig, Justin Olson, Ubyl Delaire, Abbey Albright, Jennifer Larkin, Christopher Larkin, Jenny Robinson, Jonathan Robinson, Eric Fitchette, Ellen Fitchette, Robert Workman, Gabby Szumen, Christine Gregory, Robert Gregory, Teresa Pelton, Tina Brown, Adam Brown, Tim Dovi, Darlene Stevens, Michelle McGrath, Ralph Keeney, Travis MacDowell, Nick Mossert, John Burns, Stacy Burns, Linda Hall, Amy Riotto, Gary Pelton, John Kaminski, Jereme Stiles, Eric Snow, Kelley Peri, Jordan Loope, Cheryl Loope, Catalina Charles, Kristen Ailport, Eileen Fitzgerald-Spiehs, Bernie Wade, Ronnie Wade, Gwen Barbato, Eileen Allen, Dan Congdon, Beth Cavanagh, Emily Allen, Dan Congdon, Beth Cavanagh, Emily Morse, Cassondra Morse, Corena Morse, Peggy Ivie, Janice Miller, Craig Miller, Eric Comtois, Viola Storie, John Storie, Catherine Parsons, Carole Rehkugler, Chris Applegate, Donna Timmerman, Alan Stevens, Sue Stevens, Bill Turner, Heidi Turner, Jennifer Stiles, Stacy Bradley, Nick Graziano, Arielle Brown, Jaclyn Carr, Michele Barno-Lenon, David Lenon, Bob Applegate, Anne Doyle, Lori Megwein, Peter Peroulakis, Erin Moore, Bob Martin, Joshua Bacigalupi, Linda Churnl, Josh Finn, Sandy Price, Judi Riley, Shane Adams, Karen Drescher, Nicholas Kaminski

Location: Virgil Elementary School

1. Bill Silky welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked Virgil principal Lisa Kaup for the tour of the school prior to the meeting. He reviewed the meeting protocol for everyone.
2. Bill also reviewed the purpose of the study that reads as follows:

What options exist to arrange the grades and school buildings to maintain, and perhaps enhance, the education of Cortland City School District students while ensuring fiscal responsibility to the taxpayer? How could the grades and schools be organized?

Bill indicated that the primary purpose of the meeting was two fold: (1) to review all of the key ideas that had been reviewed from previous meetings of the committee and (2) to receive feedback from the committee members on the draft report before it becomes final and forwarded to the Board of Education.

3. Bill and Alan then walked the committee and observers through all of the following study findings:

Finding 1: The live birth rate in the Cortland City School district has declined somewhat from 2004 to 2016.

Finding 2: The district's K-12 enrollment has declined from 2,637 in 2012-13 to 2,362 this current year.

Finding 3: The projected enrollment for the school district is expected to continue to decline out to 2024-25 to approximately 2,007 students.

Finding 4: All of the elementary schools have experienced a decline in enrollment since 2013-14 with Parker and Virgil seeing the largest drops.

Finding 5: Home-schooled students in Cortland average about 45-50 per year while the number of non-resident students attending the district has dropped from 23 in 2013-14 to just six this year.

Finding 6: Approximately 40 students a year from Cortland attend schools elsewhere.

Finding 7: Cortland County's population has dropped since 2005 and the U.S. Census Bureau projects the county's population will continue to drop through 2040.

Finding 8: The median age of Cortland County residents is increasing and the typical childbearing age group (25-44) is declining.

Finding 9: Elementary class sizes in the district this year vary from 12 to 24 and the average class size compares favorably to other Cortland County school districts and New York State as a whole.

Finding 10: Virgil is the smallest elementary school with only one section of a grade while Barry is the largest with some grades (1, 4, 5, 6) this year having three sections.

Finding 11: The elementary special area subject offerings are quite similar in terms of the amount of time students receive per week, except there are some differences from one building to the next.

Finding 12: Elementary school student performance on the NYS tests in grades 3-8 for the past four years are quite similar across buildings.

Finding 13: Cortland Junior-Senior High School offers a very comprehensive program to its students.

Finding 14: Junior High students can accelerate in math and science and they have the opportunity to gain first year credit in a foreign language.

Finding 15: The High School curriculum offers two foreign languages, an array of business courses, a number of technology courses, and other curriculum opportunities many school districts have eliminated.

Finding 16: Cortland students have the opportunity to take career and technical education classes at the OCM BOCES and in fact 28% of seniors and juniors did so.

Finding 17: The district has 337 students current in need of special education services up from 291 in 2012-13; this represents approximately 14% of the overall district enrollment.

Finding 18: Parker and Randall are the oldest school buildings in the district both having been built in 1928 while the Junior-Senior High is the newest built in 1964.

Finding 19: Of the elementary schools, Barry is the largest (65,840 sq. ft.) and Virgil is the smallest (34,654 sq. ft.).

Finding 20: There are more rooms in the elementary schools than are needed to house the district's elementary students.

Finding 21: The Junior-Senior High School is only used at approximately 54% capacity.

Finding 22: The 2015 building conditions survey (BCS) shows that all the schools need improvements.

Finding 23: The district total for capital work from the BCS to just complete priority 1 immediate needs is \$27,720,525.

Finding 24: Utility costs for each of the elementary schools vary from \$42,707 at Virgil to \$61,215 at Barry. Closing any school usually results in about 40% savings on utility bills.

Finding 25: With respect to instructional staff, Cortland has 250 teachers, 31 teaching assistants, 47 teacher aides and nine building principals.

Finding 26: The percentage of salary, on average, for district employees is 47% for benefits.

Finding 26: Staff savings from closing Parker Elementary School would be approximately \$801,685 in salary and benefits.

Finding 27: Staff savings from closing Virgil Elementary School would be approximately \$592,888 in salary and benefits.

Finding 28: Cortland uses a double trip bussing system to get students to and from school each day.

Finding 29: Currently, the district has some students that walk to school-for grades 7-12 who live within 1.5 miles of the Jr-Sr High School and K-6 students living within .9 mile from their respective elementary school.

Finding 30: To some degree, the district's transportation routes are organized around the elementary attendance zones, however the district has a very complex transportation system that has regular bus routes stopping at multiple schools.

Finding 31: Cortland transports students out of the district for their education program to the McEvoy Center, Homer Central School District, CCA, and St. Mary's. In addition, the district transports students to special education program locations in Solway UFSD, T-S-T BOCES, George Junior Republic, and a residential school in Rochester.

Finding 32: The district provides one bus each day at 3:15 for high school students that get extra academic assistance and a 4:30 bus for student athletes. Additionally, there is a 4:30 late bus run for elementary students in the Extended Day Program.

Finding 33: Cortland residents have passed school budget votes in nine of the past ten years.

Finding 34: Cortland residents have supported capital project votes on two recent occasions (2007 and 2014) in recent years as well as 11 of 12 bus propositions since 2005.

Finding 35: The district's restricted fund balance has been declining the last three years which is not a positive sign.

Finding 36: The \$291,137 Cortland had at the end of last year in its unassigned fund balance is only .6% of this year's general fund budget. This is an extremely low amount to maintain.

Finding 37: Cortland used \$535,000 of its fund balance to hold down the tax rate this year, therefore it will need to come up with this same amount next year to do the same or it will experience a fiscal challenge.

Finding 38: In June 2017 the State Comptroller's office found the district is financing operating deficits with fund balance and reserves which is adversely impacting the district's finances.

Finding 39: The district has principal and interest payments on existing capital debt that extend through the 2031-32 school year.

4. Following this, Bill shared the conclusion (answers to the critical study questions) with the committee as follows:

As consultants we have concluded that there are several options for arranging the grades and schools to achieve the stated purposes outlined above. While several "feasible" options were explored in depth, only a few provide a "desirable" direction in our opinion for the district to pursue in light of the desire to maintain or improve the education of Cortland students while being fiscally responsible to the taxpayer.

5. Alan then offered the following tentative recommendations the consultants have proposed for Board consideration:

A. It is recommended that the district convene a facilities planning committee whose role it will be to develop and monitor a long term facilities plan for the district. This will include the closure of one or more of the school buildings, the scope of work to be performed from the Building Condition Survey, the long term the design of appropriate school facilities and the financing of these initiatives. This committee should be comprised of both school staff and members of the community.

B. It is recommended that the Board of Education consider the following options as both "feasible" and "desirable" as it looks to the future.

- Option 6: Close Virgil and keep the remaining elementary schools open as K-6 buildings; maintain the current 7-8, 9-12 Junior-Senior High School configuration.
- Option 7: Close Parker and keep the remaining elementary schools open as K-6 buildings; maintain the current 7-8, 9-12 Junior-Senior High School configuration.
- Option 8: Close Parker and form grade centers as follows: K-2 at Smith and Virgil and grades 3-6 at Barry and Randall.
- Option 9: Close Virgil and form grade centers as follows: K-2 at Randall and Smith and grades 3-6 at Barry and Parker.

C. It is recommended that the Board of Education conduct at least one public hearing/comment period on these options for the general public to express opinions.

D. It is recommended that the district implement these options in the 2019-20 school year. This will allow for adequate time to conduct one or more hearings to allow the public to make concerns and comments known about each of the options under consideration and for sufficient planning time to finalize implementation details so that the transition is as smooth as possible

6. The Advisory Committee members were then asked to break up into three small groups and react to the report and, more specifically, to the tentative recommendations the consultants have put forward. The following feedback was received from the committee members:

- What are the implications for transportation? Kids will be on the bus longer if we close Virgil.
- Will there come a time when the state will come in and take over and then tell us which school we have to close?
- Transportation implications are not clear...will we have to add buses and drivers if we go to sister schools?
- Which buildings are the most energy efficient?
- The age of the school building is not an appropriate criterion for deciding which school to close.
- What are the costs of closing a school?
- What would it look like if each of the elementary buildings were considered for closure?
- Can we lease space to BOCES to generate revenue?
- We don't want to lose the neighborhood school approach.
- Virgil home values would decline if the school were to close.
- We need to look at community schools.

7. After this, the meeting was opened to the observers to ask questions and make statements. Below is what was presented:

- If the district was to try to sell the school that was closed, would it be easier to sell Parker in the city rather than Virgil which is outside of the city?
- Virgil is near and dear to my heart.
- The district should cut expenses and increase revenues rather than close a school.
- There has been \$8.5 million of development in Virgil in the past five years.
- If we need to raise taxes then do it....don't close schools.
- What are the educational benefits of these options?
- Class sizes will increase with all of these options.
- Don't lose the neighborhood schools.

8. The meeting concluded with a reminder to everyone present of upcoming dates including:

- January 23rd at 6:30 p.m. when the final report will be presented to the Board of Education by the consultants. This will take place at the Jr-Sr High School
- February 6th at 6:30 at the Jr-Sr High School there will be a public hearing on the study conducted by the Board of Education

We believe this covers the essence of the discussions at our meeting on January 3rd. If you have questions with these notes, please feel free to contact me.

Bill encouraged all committee members to attend the presentation of the final report to the Board of Education.

C: Michael Hoose