

# Dixon Parents Express Opposition to Middle School Proposal

*Written by Dennis Beard Thursday, 02 December 2010 15:56*



WEBSTER COUNTY, KY - A group of roughly 30 parents and other Dixon citizens gathered Monday night at the Webster County Board of Education meeting to address the board about their disapproval of a proposal to convert Dixon Elementary into a middle school.

Before inviting people in the audience to speak, Webster County Board of Education Chairman James Nance told the group the board wouldn't be voting on the subject during Monday's meeting, and that a public forum will be held before any such vote on the issue takes place. He also said the board is still awaiting more information from the district administration about the pros and cons of such a proposal.

The subject of a middle school, which has been a topic of discussion periodically over the last decade or more, most recently came up again as district administrators began wrangling with ways to continue improving student achievement while at the same time managing an ever-dwindling pool of revenue money largely provided by the state. Webster County School District Superintendent James Kemp said previously that the district is likely to see additional cuts in state revenue in the 2010-2011 school year, and that if a middle school concept isn't adopted, the board could face the possibility of having to close two elementary schools as a result.

Discussion of the subject were heated at several points Monday night, including during an exchange near the end when audience member Nicole Watson directly asked Nance if the board would call a special meeting to prevent the community from being able to address the board before a vote.

"We could, but we're not going to do you that way," Nance said, reiterating a similar statement he made before the discussion with the audience began. "We are not going to run this behind your back."

Nance went on to say that he and the rest of the board are accountable to the public and will do everything in the open to meet that expectation of accountability.

Board member Tim McCormick agreed, saying he has no intention of casting a "secret" vote and that he intends to vote for what is best for the district after reviewing all of the information once it is presented.

Parents at the meeting Monday night expressed concerns similar to a different group of Dixon residents who attended a board meeting at Sebree Elementary last month, and most of them stated they don't oppose a middle school concept, just the conversion of Dixon Elementary into the proposed facility.

Questions from the audience included concerns about the motivation for the proposal, where elementary age students will be required to attend school after Dixon is closed, and what the time line on the process is.

"Our children aren't getting everything they need," Nance said in response to the questions about where the proposal is coming from, and noted that faculty and administrators in the district have expressed strong support for a middle school concept in the county.

Board members and administrators also addressed concerns about the impact on younger children attending at Dixon, after parent Lori Shepherd asked if the board had researched the impact on children at Dixon.

"That's something this board is wrestling with," Nance said. "We don't want to hurt any kids."

Shepherd said her question hadn't been answered, to which Nance replied he didn't have an answer yet.

Webster County School District Assistant Superintendent Alan Lossner said he didn't believe kids would be negatively impacted by the change.

"Kids are resilient," he said, noting the merger decision with Providence Independent School District a few years ago.

Shepherd then asked Lossner if he had children, and when he said he did, she asked him if he had children with ADHD or separation disorder issues as she began to cry.

Board member E Carolyn Tucker spoke next. "I understand what you're saying, and I'm familiar with ADHD," Tucker said. "I know there are some things that won't be best for kids. There's no denying that. You have to look at everything. By doing that, I was told there's a chance that because we have lost so many millions of dollars - not thousands, millions of income... we may be looking at ways of saving two schools, not just one school. I was told there is a possibility that if we don't figure out a way to meet the needs of our children to the best of our ability... we could close two schools."

Throughout the discussion, board members pointed to the opportunity of more diversity in subject materials as a positive change that could come about as the result of creating a middle school.

At one point, Kemp said the district's current set-up lends itself to a duplication of services at each of the district's five elementary schools, especially since each middle school program at those schools has only one teacher for each subject. He said by having all of those teachers in one building, the district can diversify into different subjects instead of teaching general information.

"Basically what we do is duplication in order to have neighborhood schools, and we wind up duplicating some of the personnel without giving kids more choices," Kemp said. "Wouldn't it be nice if we could offer the option of remedial

math or pre-algebra in the seventh grade, or even Algebra I? We can't do that right now. The same thing is happening at grade eight, and that's one of the disadvantages... that we're going to start running into. All of our 'competitors' have options starting much earlier."

Concerns about overcrowding at the elementary schools were also discussed.

"Sebree Elementary is bursting at the seams," McCormick told the audience as they discussed where students would be bussed.

As parents expressed concerns about where their children might end up attending, Tucker said that was a separate issue from the middle school discussion.

"Redistricting will happen because of the overcrowding," Tucker said. Nance said a shrinking student population contributed heavily into that issue.

"Our population in Webster County is not growing, people," Nance told the crowd. "We have to rely on student enrollment to generate funds. If we don't have that, it gets harder and harder (to operate the district)."

The mention of funding issues turned the discussion toward that aspect of the middle school proposal, as members of the audience asked how the board could justify the expense of a middle school if it is losing money. Nance and Kemp said the money issues with operating the district and the expenses of building or renovating facilities aren't directly connected.

First, Kemp explained - at the specific request from community member Nicole Watson for him to do so - the differences between the various pools of funding.

"Operating money comes from the state," Kemp said, noting that each school district in Kentucky gets about \$3,800 per student on average. "The number (of students) we have is slowly decreasing every year. We've had a slight increase the last couple of years because of Providence."

He also noted some students have returned to the district after attending school in a neighboring county, which has also helped.

"Overall, over the next several years, the population will continue to go down about one to two percent gross per year," he continued. "In the long run, we're going to wind up with more facilities than we actually need."

Kemp went on to say that Providence Elementary has capacity to house up to 700 students, but currently has just under 300. "There's a school down there that could hold three of our elementaries right now," he said. "It's that empty."

Kemp next explained that the district's bonding potential is based on a different formula, and that the amount currently available to the district is approximately \$3.1 million.

"The actual cash amount sitting there (in the building fund) is about \$200,000," Kemp said as he and Nance pointed out that the building fund money cannot legally be used for any other district expense.

Before concluding the discussion, some in the audience warned the board that many children who currently attend Dixon Elementary would be home schooled before being sent to a different school in the district, and challenged the suggestion that Dixon Elementary was the best option. Some in the crowd also asked why other elementary schools aren't being considered for closure instead, to which board vice-chairperson Lisa Preston said was an option but not a feasible one given how many out-of-county students attend those schools, and she mentioned Slaughters Elementary by name.

"Yeah, you could close Slaughters (Elementary)," Preston said. "But you still have to move those kids."

It was quickly pointed out by members of the audience that Dixon Elementary has out-of- county students, but Webster County School District Assistant Superintendent Riley Ramsey said most of the approximately 30 out-of-county students at Dixon were allowed to attend there after other schools where they had applied didn't have the space to house them.

McCormick agreed with Preston's sentiment that closing other schools isn't feasible, noting that if they tried to incorporate more schools into the proposal it would just mean more parents from those communities coming to address the board in opposition.

At the board's meeting in October, members directed administrators to compile a list of the questions and prepare written answers for them to be published in The J-E and other local media sources. As of Monday, the compilation of answers wasn't completed, but Kemp told The J-E he would have them ready within a week, to be included in the Dec. 9 edition.

Approximately 30 parents and other concerned citizens attended Monday night's Webster County Board of Education meeting to express their concerns about a proposal by Webster County School District administrators that would convert Dixon Elementary into a middle school. (J-E photo by Dennis Beard)