

Parents, Citizens Express Concerns About Middle School Concept in Webster Co.

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WEBSTER COUNTY, KY - Before a crowd of nearly 50 people that included principals, teachers, parents, and other concerned citizens from across the Webster County School District, the Webster County Board of Education at its meeting Monday night in Sebree heard a recommendation from the Webster County School District administration to convert Dixon Elementary into a middle school. At the start of the meeting, Webster County Board of Education Chairman James Nance told the audience that the board wouldn't be voting on the recommendation during Monday's meeting, but invited those in attendance to address the board about their concerns.

Webster County School District Assistant Superintendent Alan Lossner then presented an outline of the reasons for the recommendation (see related story), and told the board that two of Webster County's elementary schools are "bursting at the seams" because of growing student populations. Coupled with the creation of a middle school concept is the redistribution of younger age students in order to better balance the population counts at the district's four other elementary facilities.

"Specifically, Sebree and Clay (elementaries)," he said during his presentation of the written report, which he, Assistant Superintendent Riley Ramsey, and Superintendent James Kemp spent most of Friday developing. "This will more effectively utilize the space."

Some of the reasons given for the change included expanding services that can be offered to middle school age students, reducing administrators' time spent on discipline referrals for middle school students in order to give them more time focusing on the needs of younger students, and the opportunity to help pair students with different teaching environments that might be more conducive to their learning styles.

Immediately following the presentation, several community residents spent the next 90 minutes of the board's meeting in an opportunity to address members about the proposal.

First to speak was Carolyn Tapp, who read a prepared letter to the board. In it, she said she is "anxious about the prospect of losing Dixon (Elementary).

"When this issue came up in 2002, I didn't have an opinion... but I soon realized I didn't want one (a middle school) for our county at all." She said she found research supporting the style of kindergarten through eighth grade schools under which Webster County currently operates.

"The longer they (students) stay, the better they perform," she said. "The drop-out rates are better (in a K-8 school). Stand-alone middle schools perform worse." She also said she thinks it will be "harder to staff a middle school" because fewer teachers will want to work in such an environment.

"I hate to think we would lose any of our teachers," she said.

Tapp next expressed concerns about a potential drop in parental involvement within the school district. "Many are willing to volunteer at the elementary level... but with the rising cost of gasoline, it becomes harder if they have to drive farther," she said. "Having children at two or more different schools could (split their focus)."

Next, Tapp said she was concerned about what one middle school would mean for the district's academic team program. "We have five schools that can compete in academic competitions," she said, noting concerns that a "better team" might just mean the very top performing kids from all the combined schools, reducing the opportunity for some students to participate.

Lastly, she asked what would happen to the district's FMD unit, a program for kids with special needs that is currently housed at Dixon Elementary.

Nathaniel Blake then addressed the board briefly. He expressed concern about a loss of community pride among Dixon children if the elementary school there is converted.

Next to speak was Chad Townsend, who said he wasn't necessarily "for or against" the creation of a middle school, but instead asked about how the idea of converting Dixon Elementary into a middle school would affect elementary students who currently attend there.

"How are you guys going to determine where my child is going to attend school?" he asked.

Nance said it is something the board is studying, and at the very end of the meeting, after parents and other citizens had left, he and other members reviewed a proposed attendance zone map that would redistrict the county's elementary school zones. The map was not presented during the public forum portion of the meeting.

Townsend continued by asking what would happen to the staff at the middle school level, a question that again came up later during the discussion with citizens.

Board member Lisa Preston, in response to Townsend and other citizens' inquiries on the subject, said as teachers retire, they hope to close those positions through attrition.

(Editor's note: The prepared report states a middle school in Webster County would require approximately 12 teachers, but right now the district reportedly has a total of 16 middle school grade teachers across its five elementary campuses. District administrators have told The J-E they expect several teachers to retire within the next year or two.)

Townsend then suggested the board put the idea on a ballot for voters to consider, but board members said they didn't think that is a good idea.

"Dixon has a lot more at stake than people in other parts of the county, and if you put that on the ballot, it might not come out in your favor," board member Steve Henry told Townsend.

Wendy Shepherd was next to address the board. She expressed concern about finding a baby sitter to watch children when some of those kids are attending school in different towns, and questioned the speed at which the idea seemed

to be moving.

“What’s the big rush to do this?” Shepherd asked. “If you don’t have enough to build (a new middle school), then save money and build it when you have enough.”

Right now, the district has approximately \$3 million in bonding capacity, which is far short of the amount they would need to construct a new building.

As the crowd applauded Shepherd’s idea for the board to build a new middle school instead of converting Dixon Elementary, Nance said the idea isn’t feasible.

“I don’t know how old your children are, but they may not be in school by the time we have enough money to do that,” he said.

Board member Lisa Preston shared Nance’s sentiment. “First of all, we have a bonding (capacity) of about \$3.1 million,” Preston said. “That’s it. To build new, that’s \$15 million.”

She also explained that state and federal regulations limit how the district, any district, can spend the money it receives from other government entities.

Shepherd then asked to see data regarding the finances of each school, and asked whether the board had fully examined if Dixon Elementary is the right location for a middle school. She suggested the board “close Slaughters and put the money from that school toward a middle school.”

Preston said the board had examined those possibilities. “The least amount of students to be hurt... or disrupted was the K-5 at Dixon,” she said, noting that several students at Dixon actually live closer to a different school in the county. “As you take those out, and the middle school kids out, that number (of affected students) goes down.

“Closing Slaughters (Elementary) won’t help,” she added, before also addressing a point Shepherd and others made about younger children possibly having to be on a school bus for a longer portion of the day.

“We’ve been dealing with the route thing all our lives,” she said, noting that students from Onton — where she lives — have long attended at Slaughters Elementary. “That’s not something that has really changed in our area. It would be new for you.”

Regarding the speed of the process, board member Tim McCormick and others said the dire financial straits the district is in right now have given the idea its momentum.

“We were told if we don’t come up with a plan, Dr. Kemp could come back and say, ‘I’m not going to ask you which school do you want to make a middle school, I’m going to ask you which two schools do you want to shut down,’” McCormick said. “That is a distinct possibility.”

Kemp has maintained that the state’s financial difficulties could lead to further reductions in education funding to local school districts across Kentucky next year, including possibly several hundred thousands of dollars in Webster County. Kemp and board members said that is money they can’t afford to operate without.

Shepherd then asked about using the approximate \$3.1 million worth of bonding money, but McCormick explained that money can only legally be used for building.

"That's a different pile of money," he said. "That's all we can use it for (construction). We're looking for a way to keep our education intact, and he's (Kemp) offering this as a way to (maintain test scores). Is it best, or do we take a chance on what the state's going to do for us? We might make it, and we might not."

Preston added: "We've been told this is a need for us to survive."

Board member E Carolyn Tucker, who has touted the idea of an "academy" as part of the middle school concept, also responded directly to Shepherd's questions and suggestions about how to handle the situation.

"Dixon (Elementary) is going to be the 'sacrificial lamb' so the county can take the money and move it in a different direction," Tucker said. "I can support the middle school educationally if it's done in the right way. I cannot support the thought of closing Slaughters (Elementary). If we want to do the right thing for kids, we've got to be looking at the schools that achieve well, and one of the schools that educate the kids the best is Slaughters."

Several people in the crowd shouted back across the gym that Slaughters has fewer students, inferring that a smaller school setting is the reason for the better results. Tucker continued, saying funding for education is a growing problem everywhere.

"It's happening in Dixon. It's happening all over the county. We cannot mix the pots of money. It took me a long time to get that. The money apparently is not there from the state, and they hold back more and more and more and more money. We're going to have to look for different sources of money."

Tucker said as a Dixon resident and descendant of Dixon residents, she doesn't want to see the town lose its elementary school, but that more than that, she doesn't want to see the school district lose additional schools.

"When I heard they were possibly going to ask us to close two schools, that got my attention," Tucker said. "Whatever we vote to do, I will support it. I am not ready to vote for a middle school at this time, but if even the principal at Dixon isn't willing to say this is a bad idea, then maybe we should look at it."

Other speakers from the audience included Karen Brown, Vicki Shadrick, and Lori Weldon. Brown said she is "not against a middle school" but questioned why the board spent approximately \$10 million in renovation of the high school if it knew it was eventually going to have to add a middle school component. Brown also asked what personal rights parents and students would have about where they would attend school. She also challenged the decision to close Dixon Elementary as part of the concept.

"Who ever heard of a county seat not having an elementary school?" she asked the board. "I just think this is ridiculous." The crowd applauded at her comment.

Shadrick said she has two children attending at Dixon Elementary, but that she is concerned about students across the county. "This is going to affect every school. This is going to affect all the students," Shadrick said. She also asked the board to be honest with citizens about the motivations behind the decision, rather than presenting a list of "pros" that defend it, and said she didn't want the board to be in a hurry about making a decision.

"If we're going to push forward for education reasons, we need to make sure the funds are in place for a top-notch facility and not just enough to get by on," Shadrick said. "The issue with me is not whether we need a middle school, it's... let's do it right the first time and make sure we have everything we need to put this forward," she added.

Shadrick's final comment involved the suggestion of creating an impartial group to study the proposal and review the district's budget. Preston said the board already has a group that does that, the local planning committee which is formed every few years to give a report and make recommendations. Preston said they have had a middle school recommendation at the top of their lists for the last decade, but that the board has never acted on that request.

Weldon challenged a previous statement Kemp and other administrators made regarding the opportunity for Dixon students to use the school district's Area Technology Center, something the other elementary schools in the county don't have access to.

Weldon said she called Dixon Elementary Principal Eric Wheatley about those claims. "Dixon kids were offered opportunities at the ATC but only because enrollment at the tech center was so low," she said, adding that students from Dixon Elementary weren't offered that chance to attend ATC courses this year. "Things are being thrown out there that Dixon kids get more opportunities than other kids, but that's not the case. That's just not true."

Nance then asked building principals in attendance at Monday's meeting to share their thoughts about the middle school concept. All of the principals who spoke endorsed the idea.

Providence Elementary Principal Greg Bowles said the concept would create many opportunities for students in the sixth to eighth grade range, and that he supported the idea "as long as its done in a positive manner."

Jeanette Smith, principal of the district's alternative center, said she sympathized with the parents and citizens of Dixon. "I've been in two districts that have had to go through this process, and it's always very difficult," Smith said. "Your primary concern as parents is your children. No one up here doesn't realize that. No administrator up here is unfeeling about that, nor for that pride that you feel for your school. Financial times are very hard. Some things are not an option."

Smith said the impact on principals of running K-8 schools can often be very demanding, and can divide their focus because students at different age groups each have different needs. "Any principal will tell you they are principals of three schools in one school," she said.

She also expressed concern for students who might be "trapped" in a social environment they don't want to be in. "I assure you that I have watched children go through K-8 schools trapped in a group they did not socially (get along with), and then they get to the high school and meet kids (with more common interests). There are so many opportunities that right now are not possible. The list goes on and on of all the positives that can be there. Take a step back and think globally and not locally, no matter how painful it is."

At that point, several in the crowd began to leave as Clay Elementary Principal Georgiann McCord came to the board table to speak. McCord said she also supports the creation of a middle school in Webster County.

"We are very strapped in the K-8 setting," McCord said. "I had hoped we would have a middle school when my daughter was that age."

She said one of the main advantages is offering teachers at that grade level the chance to improve instruction by interacting with other teachers of the same subject matter, instead of just teachers of other subjects in the same grade.

"We're in a rural community and our children don't have a lot of enrichment opportunities," McCord said. "Anything that we can do, I want to do that."

Sebree Elementary Principal Dave Rupsch said he thinks all middle school students in Webster County need a facility of their own. "Both of my boys went to middle school in Henderson County," Rupsch said. "They had opportunities kids here don't have. I'm talking academically. We have 37 kids in math, and some are farther ahead than others."

He said having a middle school would offer kids who are doing better at a particular subject the chance to accelerate their course studies in those subjects. "Our kids deserve more than we're giving them, and that is why I am for a middle school," he said. "I feel we can provide them with a better education than we are giving them under the current system. Kids in the middle and kids at the top are not getting the education they need."

Townsend again addressed the board as Rupsch concluded, suggesting the board may have to look at suspending pay raises for district administrators. McCormick said those salaries are usually set by the state, even when they aren't funded.

Nance spoke next. "I did not support the middle school the last time," Nance said, referring to discussion of the issue several years ago. "But to me, the playing field has changed since then. More things are taking place. I want a middle school for (several) reasons. First is academics. I have always strived to make the academics the best they can be in Webster County. The other is simply a matter of economics. You can't continue to deliver the services unless you've added revenue from somewhere." Nance said anyone in the public is welcome to look at the district's finances and make suggestions on ways to perform more efficiently.

A member of the crowd, who didn't identify himself, then asked if the board would be holding another forum in Dixon so that more people from that community can attend. Nance said the board hasn't set a date for future forums, but that it would consider doing so before making a final decision.

Last to speak on the subject was Carol Hill, a secretary at Providence Elementary. Hill addressed the crowd and encouraged them to "think and pray" about the issue. "When we merged, it was awful, or we thought it was at the time," Hill said. "But since it happened, it is the best thing we could have done for the students of Providence. Pray about it. Kids are real resilient, and they will be fine. Think and pray about what's best for students, and it will be fine."

Shepherd raised her hand to speak, but Nance had already begun to call for a "break" as a conclusion to the forum.

Following the "break," the board met with the Sebree Elementary Site Based Decision Making council. Rupsch, who spoke on the council's behalf, told board members Sebree Elementary is "moving toward a crisis situation in enrollment."

"We have no room," he said. "In two years, we won't be able to handle the population." Rupsch said the building is utilizing every possible space to hold classes, sometimes even in the lobby of the school.

He also shared a need regarding more teachers and staff that can speak Spanish or one of the various Hispanic dialects spoken by students who attend at Seabee. He said right now, Hispanics make up almost one-third of the school's population.

"Teachers at our school not only have to teach the core content, they also have to teach the English language," Rupsch said. "We need lower class sizes because our teachers are maxed out."

He said Hispanic students don't have trouble reading, but they do sometimes have trouble understanding concepts behind some of the terms. "Yes, we can teach them to read, but that doesn't mean they understand everything they're reading," he said. "That's why we need some assistance there."

The board then approved a series of requests during Kemp's report, including the purchase of band items, a maintenance truck, and revision to the district's working budget for the current fiscal year. They also approved a series of standard "consent agenda" items, and then adjourned their meeting after poring over copies of a new map that outlined a proposed set of new boundaries for the district's elementary schools, if Dixon is converted into a middle school.

"Why didn't we just dissect the Dixon district?" McCormick asked after seeing the map. "Why did we have to rezone the other districts?"

Others on the board expressed a similar sentiment, and board member Sandi Jackson encouraged the board to hold a second public forum.

"I think we owe it to all the people to decide when we're going to have another forum," Jackson said.

Nance said he agreed with the idea of having a second forum, but added that he didn't want to have one until the board is ready to vote on the proposal. "I don't think we should tell them we're going to have a forum and then not take a vote," he said.

Members informally agreed to compile a list of all the questions asked during the meeting and then release a list of answers to be published, but didn't specify a timetable for completing that project.



Roughly 50 parents, teachers, administrators, and other concerned citizens turned out for Monday's Webster County Board of Education meeting at Sebree Elementary.

Photo by Dennis Beard

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