

Administrative Recommendation

Keene Elementary Schools

October 25, 2011

Wayne Woolridge, Co-Superintendent

OVERVIEW

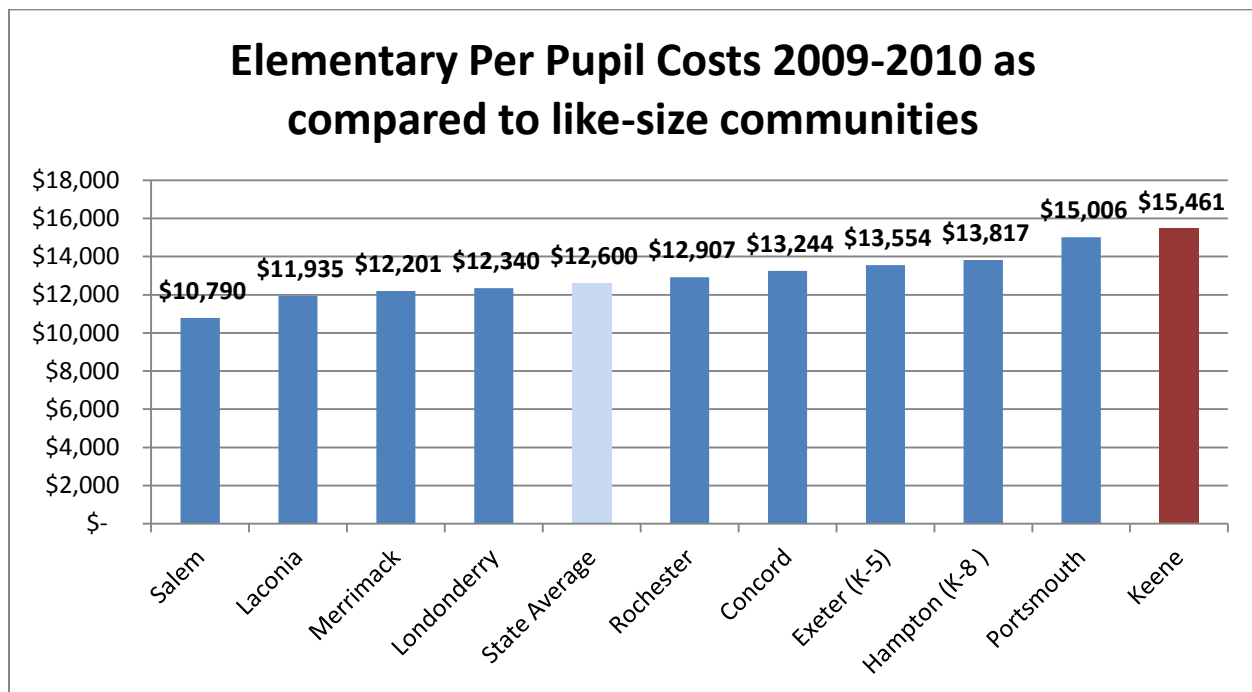
I have been an administrator in Keene for over 20 years. During that time, I've been impressed with and grateful for the level of support the community has shown for public education: Witness our beautiful new middle school.

But we can't take this support for granted. We owe it to the Keene community to look hard for innovative ways to deliver the quality education our students deserve at a lower cost if at all possible. Especially now, when times are so tough and family budgets are tighter than ever, we need to consider every possible option.

In September 2009, the board created the Administrative Structure Review Task Force and assigned the following tasks:

1. To research the feasibility of sharing a principal between two smaller elementary schools; and
2. To study the administrative structure in the entire district, seeking recommendations for efficiencies and cost savings.

The members of the Keene Administrative Structure Review Task Force included: Franklin School Principal Bill Harris, KMS Principal Dotty Frazier, KHS Principal Alan Chmiel, Board members Kristin Blais and Carl Panza, and myself. The task force began by investigating like school systems in New Hampshire. Some differences became obvious early on, such as the fact that the elementary cost per student in Keene, was the highest among like districts.



This is a difficult level to maintain for a number of reasons. Keene stands to lose \$1.6 million in state revenue when the adequacy legislation is implemented beginning July 1, 2013 and potentially more if the Constitutional amendment being formulated to abolish the state obligation to fund an adequate education passes. This amendment will appear on the general ballot in November 2012. If the amendment passes, children in the state would lose their constitutional right to an adequate education. In order to maintain the quality of education we currently provide for our students, local taxpayers would be required to shoulder more of the cost.

As a reminder, when the Claremont case was decided in 1997, New Hampshire was last among the 50 states in state aid as a percent of school revenue. Actually, if New Hampshire's state aid had been tripled, New Hampshire still would have been last. In the year following the Claremont decision, state aid to Keene jumped from approximately \$4 million to \$15 million, saving Keene residents more than \$10 million in local property taxes. Keene received that level of state aid for two years before the Legislature began to reduce state aid to Keene to the current level of \$10,552,770 annually.

Following the Administrative Structure Review Task Force Report presented in December 2009, the Keene Board of Education established the Elementary Ad Hoc Advisory Committee in March 2010, to study and make recommendations to address high elementary costs while preserving high quality education. The committee was comprised of one elementary principal, three teachers, one former teacher, three parent representatives, Co-Superintendent Gurney, the Director of Curriculum and Assessment, the elementary special education coordinator, four board members and three community members. The committee held seventeen meetings from April 2010-June 2011 and conducted eight public forums on topics ranging from identifying educational priorities and core beliefs to cost savings ideas and potential solutions. Following these forums, a unanimous recommendation from the 18 member committee was made to the Board in June 2011.

Based on this recommendation, with consideration given to the feedback received at the forums, the Keene School Board voted in August to move from five to four elementary schools and to narrow grade spans. One school will be PreK-1, one school will be K-1, and two schools will be for grades 2-5. It was clear from the Marinace Report that Fuller and Symonds were best suited to be the 2-5 schools, leaving Franklin, Wheelock and Daniels, our smallest buildings, as candidates for closure.

Let me discuss each of the three schools that were candidates for closure in turn, and highlight the factors that went into my recommendation.

ADMINISTRATIVE RECOMMENDATION

Each of the following three elementary schools considered for closure has distinct advantages and disadvantages.

Franklin:

Advantages	Disadvantages
Largest usable floor space of the three smaller schools.	The site is very small, with most of the open space used by either playground or parking. Future expansion of the building is severely limited.
The building is well situated on its site and allows efficient use of site for playground, vehicle access and parking.	Parking is slightly deficient for staff. There are some parking spaces for visitors on site, and additional parking spaces are available along Washington Street.
Bus and car drop-offs are separated.	Play areas are adequate, but the range of outdoor sports activities available is limited. (This may not be a disadvantage if the school serves a preK or K-1 population.)
While the building has a complicated layout, it has a looped corridor, which helps with circulation. A small courtyard brings in daylight to the middle of a rather wide building.	Oil-fired steam boilers are inefficient and need to be upgraded.
Classroom sizes at Franklin School meet current State guidelines.	
Gym and Media Center are adequate in size.	

Other Notes: Franklin currently serves 202 students.

Wheelock:

Advantages	Disadvantages
Wheelock has more usable floor space than Daniels but slightly less than Franklin.	The site is very small, with most open space used for either playground or parking.
The building is well designed and makes good use of the site. Location of the main entrance is clear.	Parking is somewhat deficient for staff, and visitors must park on the street.
In 1979, a well designed two-story wing was added to the front of the original building. It created a well-proportioned front to the complex, and provided large classrooms and generous corridors. The 1885 wing was completely renovated and a coherent circulation pattern was created for the whole building.	Bus and car drop-offs are both along Adams Street, and are not separated.
Classroom sizes at Wheelock School meet current State guidelines.	Play areas are adequate; however, the range of outdoor sports activities available is limited. (This may not be a disadvantage if the school serves a preK or K-1 population.)
Fewest code upgrades needed (e.g. part of the building is already sprinkled).	Future expansion of the building is severely limited.

Other notes: Wheelock currently serves 227 students, 72 of whom are preschool students.

Jonathan Daniels:

Advantages	Disadvantages
The site is large, flat and well-drained. The building is well-situated on its site and allows efficient use of site for playground, vehicle access and parking.	Smallest usable floor space of all elementary schools.
Location of main entrance is clear. Two of the rear entrances are wheelchair accessible.	The non-rectangular layout of the pods, and resulting complex shapes of the classrooms and ancillary spaces results in inefficiencies in the use of space.
The amount of parking is generous for the size of the school.	Classroom sizes at Daniels School for Grades 1 – 5 are substantially below current State guidelines. At 36 sq. ft. per student (State mandated maximum student density), each standard classroom can accommodate 20 students. In practice, because of the triangular shape of each classroom layout, only about 18 students per classroom can be accommodated.
Play areas are generous, with a softball field and tennis court near the school, and many other sports facilities available at the nearby Middle School. Nature trails lead through the forest to adjoining wetlands.	Kindergarten classrooms meet State floor area guidelines, but in practice also suffer from inefficiencies inherent in triangular classrooms.
There is ample extra space for future expansion.	The Media Center is part of the central circulation space (a Life Safety Code violation) and at 1130 sq. ft., is 37% undersized. The Media Center needs to be separated from the rest of the corridor with a smoke barrier, and be provided with two exits.
	The wood frame construction is problematic.
	Curtain walls between classrooms need to be replaced.

Other Notes: JD currently serves 176 students, 24 of whom are tuitioned in from Surry.

After much thoughtful deliberation, my recommendation is to close Jonathan Daniels School. I have also spoken with Co-Superintendent Bill Gurney and he feels as I do that Jonathan Daniels is the appropriate choice for closure.

The recommendation is based upon several criteria: Jonathan Daniels has the smallest square footage overall, the smallest and least flexible classrooms, and would require the greatest amount of renovation work to correct code issues. Additions and major renovations are not recommended for the Daniels building at this time; in the future, should enrollment figures increase dramatically, classroom wings would have to be completely rebuilt.

I would ask the board to consider repurposing Jonathan Daniels. The Jonathan Daniels location is of value to the district. By doing this we leave our options open in the event that many years from now we see a significant increase in student population. If Keene elementary enrollment began to increase significantly we could either renovate or build a new school on this site thus preserving our ability to have a fifth elementary school in Keene. One possibility for the use of the current building is as offices for Keene Food Service, the maintenance department, and the technicians. We currently have eight technicians that have a designated space at the Mitchell House adjacent to Alumni Field. If we were to move them to Daniels, we would no longer need that facility. Another possible use for Jonathan Daniels would be to use it as a preschool should space at Wheelock become too tight.

Many in the Daniels attendance area will be disappointed with this recommendation because they are familiar with the quality program, instructors, and principal at JD. When I moved to Keene 21 years ago, I identified the Daniels attendance area as the one I wanted for my own three children and moved into a nearby neighborhood. I chose Daniels not for the building, but for the quality of staff and principal. I also believed in their strong social curriculum and school culture. Throughout the implementation process, one of our important charges is to ensure that this quality programming will continue to exist for these students, regardless of which school they attend.

If the bond is approved in March of 2013, the renovated buildings should result in an improved learning environment for all of our elementary students. The renovation plan will improve air quality, reduce temperature variations, upgrade lighting and improve the safety of each building.

According to Mark Schneider in *Do School Facilities Affect Academic Outcomes?*, student performance depends on good air quality and quality temperature control. Students have improved mental functioning in rooms kept at moderate temperatures in the range of sixty-eight to seventy-four degrees. The ability to keep temperatures within the comfort range is important to learning and to teachers' morale according to a study by Corcoran in 1988. There are many studies that show classroom lighting plays a crucial role in student performance. The consensus of these studies is that appropriate lighting improves test scores, reduces off-task behavior, and plays a crucial role in student performance. All elementary schools will be sprinkled as part of the renovation plan.

The timeline we've established should enable us to improve the quality of our children's educational environment while allowing adequate time for an appropriate transition. The goal will be to maintain the integrity of educational programs with a commitment to Art, Music, PE and Technology Education. Appropriate space will be reserved for preschool and for the delivery of K-5 special education.

My recommendation for the partnering of the remaining four schools is as follows: The obvious connection for Fuller is Franklin as the schools are .8 miles apart and the two schools share common attendance area borders. Franklin makes a good K-1 sister school for Fuller.

The most obvious sister school for Symonds is Wheelock. Wheelock has the best elementary school building (structurally) in Keene, and already serves as a Keene preschool.

IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE

To ensure that parents will be part of the process, I have met with the presidents of all elementary Parent Teacher Organizations. I see the PTO groups as an important part of the planning process. I will be speaking to each elementary parent group on the following dates:

November 2 – Wheelock and Fuller
November 9 – Franklin
November 16 – Symonds
November 21 – Jonathan Daniels

On November 30 the administration will hold a community forum on this topic in the Keene High School Auditorium. The forum will begin with an informational presentation regarding the proposed grade span changes and will include more detail regarding the four schools to be reconfigured. This public forum is scheduled to be televised on Cheshire TV Channel 8.

If the Board approves the recommendation to close Jonathan Daniels an implementation steering committee would be formed in January. The committee would likely need to meet weekly.

The Keene Elementary Principals and I recommend the following subcommittees:

Curriculum
Transportation and Redistricting
Facilities
Enrollment
Special Education
Building Repurposing

A final report would be presented to the Board in October 2012. If the Keene Board approves the plan a warrant article would be placed on the March 2013 ballot asking voters for the approval to sell a bond to renovate the four elementary schools. Building renovations would begin during the summer of 2013 and take two summers to complete. The renovated schools would be ready for the start of the 2014-2015 school year.

There are two reasons that make this timetable desirable. First, by March of 2013 Keene residents will have the detailed information they need to make an informed choice. Second, we should know by the time of the March 2013 vote if the renovation will qualify for state building aid. (The Keene Middle School project received a 58% reimbursement from the state. Currently a moratorium exists on building aid.)

CONCLUSION

There are significant benefits of this plan that will improve the quality of education for our elementary students. The plan, if adopted, will improve the safety and learning environment of the remaining elementary schools and will result in cost savings to the district of approximately \$1,000,000 annually.

Change is always difficult and carries with it an inherent risk. It is hard to imagine an educational environment better than the one we have now. Our current elementary school system is familiar to us and we all believe we are successfully serving the needs of our students. By allowing the process to work through the implementation committee I believe we can create an educational environment better than the one we currently have: an environment that will meet our students' needs well into the future and one that will save the district millions of dollars.

To echo the Keene Elementary Ad Hoc Advisory Committee:

“This recommendation does not come lightly or without awareness of the significance of the change for our students, staff and families. It is a change that requires something of everyone, but in turn honors the highest priorities provided by the community: equity among all schools and for all students, the ability to preserve a curriculum that is strong in core areas as well as the arts and wellness, and strong support for great teaching and the development and mentoring of great teachers.”

At this time, the Board is not expected to vote on the recommendations; however I will welcome questions from the Board. Frank Marinace and Tibor Farkas from Marinace Architects join us this evening as well as Tom Remillard, Director of Buildings and Grounds. They also welcome your questions.