

Middle School Consolidation Report

September 19, 2017

Report to the Board of Education

Purpose: The Board of Education established a Steering Committee composed of three Board members and the Superintendent to study the potential of consolidation of the two middle schools. This action was based on several factors including declining enrollment at all grade levels, relocating 5th grade to the elementary level at completion of construction projects, issues of providing equal programs at both middle schools, and concern with financial uncertainties at the state level. This report is a summary of these issues and is meant as a base for further discussion.

Instruction and Educational Issues: Combining both middle schools may afford educational opportunities that are not possible with the current two-school configuration. The district strives to provide equal opportunities for all students at both schools, but that has been difficult due to the unequal populations and declining enrollments.

One of the difficulties has been to provide qualified teaching staff for small but important programs such as world language, music, arts, technology, and other electives. The district has had to hire part-time teachers or provide split assignments where a teacher is required to teach at both middle schools. These teaching configurations have resulted in high turnover and a lack of consistency for instructional programs. Consolidation would eliminate these staffing concerns.

Another issue has been the attempt to provide classes such as art, music, drama, technology, and vocational/shop classes at two sites. With declining numbers, offering a full array of educational opportunities at two sites is impossible. This has resulted in inequities between the schools and a lack of options for programs depending on the school. All students deserve a full array of educational opportunities. This will be possible through consolidation.

One of the interesting middle school reform concepts is providing exposure to a multitude of courses through an "elective wheel." Students would have the opportunity to explore and discern new interests in introductory courses in art, music, drama, technology, cuisine, shop/crafts, language, business, and others in middle school in preparation for course selection in high school. In addition, consolidation will afford the opportunity to develop innovative programming including several integrated high school level courses to ensure all students are ready for the transition to high school. With the current enrollments, such configurations are not possible. However, with consolidation, the new "economy of scale" could provide such programs for all students.

Facilities: Enrollment projections indicate that the grade 6-7-8 numbers will continue to decrease over the next few years to 400-440 total. Without consolidation, there will be two separate schools with around 200-220 in each school. The official state reported capacities for Pawcatuck and Mystic Middle School buildings are 380 and 525 respectively. The maximum full capacity of MMS if rooms are not shared by teachers is approximately 625. Due to the small square footage space in each classroom at Pawcatuck Middle School, if consolidation were to occur, the new middle school would need to be located at the current Mystic Middle School site. With maximum projected enrollments of 441 in years 2021-2026, there will be ample room at the Mystic site for one middle school. However, there will also be some needed facility improvements such as additional air conditioning, additional parking, and a few other improvements that will be included in a final recommendation should the Board of Education decide to move to consolidate.

One other issue is the use of the Pawcatuck Middle School facility if consolidation is approved. The Steering Committee is considering several options and would like community input into this decision. One option includes keeping the facility under the purview of the Board of Education and relocate Central Office, as well as provide space for *New Alternative/Special Education Programs*, and other needed programs to that facility. In addition, with the fields, gym, library and other specialty areas at PMS, that site could become a community center with coordination with the COMO and/or Recreation and would be a wonderful to the Pawcatuck community and for the families in that area.

If Central Office could be relocated to PMS, the town could then use the current CO and/or sell it and use the funds for other needs in the town. An estimate from several years ago placed the unofficial value of the Central Office site at around \$800,000. The Board of Finance could use these funds for other town priorities or to make up funds that the state may reduce in the future.

Financial: The most important factors with potential consolidation are the educational opportunities for all middle school aged students. However, there will also be financial benefits to the taxpayers of Stonington with consolidation. There will be some costs for relocation such as moving costs, additional parking, facility upgrades, etc. However, there will be ongoing savings by the reduction of administrative and support staff and savings from vacating the current Central Office building. The estimate is that the district will save approximately \$800,000 to \$1,000,000 annually with this consolidation. With the pending financial reductions from the State of Connecticut to town and district budgets, these savings will help reduce the impacts to the taxpayers of Stonington for years to come.