

June 12, 2008

As the community discussion regarding our school district's facilities intensifies and more people are learning of our school facility's deficiencies and "issues", I feel it is important to point out a significant piece of the school facility puzzle and our school district's history that is too often being overlooked. That is grade configuration.

Approximately 25 years ago our district was experiencing enrollment increases at the Elementary School level coupled with the loss of several classrooms due to state mandates that required dedicated, special education classrooms. Increased enrollments and fewer classrooms created a space crunch at the Elementary Schools. This led to the BOE's decision to relocate 5<sup>th</sup> grade from Elementary Schools to Baldwin, changing the district's grade configuration from (2) three-year Middle Schools to today's grade configuration of (2) two-year Middle Schools (see chart below).

Time Frame*	Configuration	Total Grades
Pre 1989	Baldwin & Adams both 6-8.	3
Post 1989	Baldwin 5-6. Adams 7-8.	4

*\*The BOE's decision to change the grade configuration was made in the late 1980's. Exact date to be verified.*

While there were subsequent pros and cons to the BOE's decision to change our district's grade configuration, **their decision was made with one primary, driving reason; that there simply was insufficient space at the Elementary Schools. The BOE's decision to change grade configuration:**

- **Was not made to improve educational programming.**
- **Was not made to improve educational delivery.**
- **Was not made to improve child development.**
- **Was not made as or intended to be a long-term, district-wide school facility solution.**

**The BOE's decision to change the grade configuration was made to a) better utilize existing school facility space and b) to postpone a relatively costly, long-term school facility building/expansion project.**

There is a plethora of research-based studies and administrator surveys, including one conducted by the National Middle School Association surveying over 14,000 schools, that cite two-year schools as being less preferred both educationally and developmentally than to other grade configuration alternatives. Commitment level by students and parents declines with two-year schools. Two-year schools are not a trend in education today. Districts that have two-year schools do so for facility/space considerations. Districts do not move to two-year schools to help improve the district's educational or developmental outcomes.

On numerous public occasions I have heard our Superintendent of Schools say, "Grade configuration is not nearly as important as what is going on inside the classroom", I absolutely agree. That statement is typically followed with "Additionally, if we were to start over with a blank slate, we would not design the school facilities and our grade configuration they way we have it today". I also agree and to that end,

question why our community would invest huge taxpayer dollars into two new or significantly renovated school facilities that would further commit our district's future to a grade configuration that if given the choice, we would not replicate.

Our district's administration and staff do a great job today working within the deficiencies of our school facilities and there are many viable, alternative grade configurations. However, **not allowing for grade reconfiguration when funding a \$100, \$150, \$200 million project epitomizes the "tail wagging the dog" scenario.**

So all things considered, educational and developmental benefits, cost to taxpayers, facility flexibility, etc., I recommend the following alternative school facility option.

### **Grade Reconfiguration, Partial New and Partial Renovate As New**

- Build additional classroom space at the existing elementary schools that can handle more classrooms to accommodate grade 5.
- Renovate Adams as new.
- Renovate GHS as new to include partial demolition and partial new space.
- Change the grade configuration to (4) K-5 and (2) 6-8 schools.

With this grade configuration, both Baldwin and Adams would have smaller grade densities and total student enrollment that is approximately 25% less than today's levels. With 25% less students, these two school facilities would then have much needed space flexibility, one of the initial goals of the Facility Task Force. Additionally, lunch waves, traffic flow and busing become more efficient and manageable. Most importantly, there are significant educational and developmental benefits that fewer transitions and smaller grade has proven to provide and there would be twice the number of available extracurricular opportunities too - another significant benefit to Guilford's children. Lastly, there would be enough available extra space at Adams that the GPS Administrative Offices, now housed in three inefficient locations to be relocated under one roof.

This is the only facility alternative that provides:

- Fewer transitions and smaller grade density, both proven educational and developmental benefits.
- Space flexibility.
- More efficient busing and traffic flow.
- More extracurricular opportunities.
- Consolidation of the GPS Administrative offices

What I'm proposing here, as just one alternative, is a phased plan as other districts typically do since it is so difficult to solve large, costly school building projects all at once. If we are looking comprehensively at our Town's assets, as we should be, then this should be a part of the master plan and a portion of it be put to referendum.

Doug Newman

Former member of the BOE's appointed Facility Task Force.