

Jeffco Facilities Usage Committee- Meeting Notes

Meeting held August 17, 2009 from 3:30 to 6:00 pm.

Opening of Meeting

Justin opened the meeting. He told the committee that due to the amount of work they had to do, that the committee will now be meeting every two weeks; please refer to the back of the agenda for these dates. At tonight's meeting, the committee will have the opportunity to hear from a panel of representatives from other districts that have done similar work. They will then be able to ask the panel any questions that they have.

Panel Discussion

Boulder Valley School District
Dr. Chris King, Superintendent

Denver Public Schools
Dr. Kristin Waters, Assistant to the Superintendent on Innovation & Reform

Englewood School District
Peg LaPlante, Assistant Superintendent and Chief Financial Officer

Littleton Public Schools
Scott Murphy, Superintendent
Kirk Madsen, Assistant Superintendent of Operations
Tracie Rainey, Community Member

A representative from each school district was asked to answer the following questions about their district's experiences:

1. What was the goal of the district?
2. What did they learn through the process?
3. What advice would they have for this committee?
4. Has their district realized in savings from school closure/consolidation?
5. How are they planning on using their work in the future?

Kirk Madsen (Littleton)

Littleton's goal was to meet the needs of all students using resources in the most effective way possible, as well as looking at under-used facilities. He thought that it was most important for their district to have a discussion with community about the realities in their district. He said that they learned that this is a very complex issue and that those

involved have very different levels of understanding. For instance, elementary school families had not been involved in the district for a long time, or were aware of district issues, so they must be brought up to speed. His concluding thoughts were that for this work to be done (1) there must be significant board support and direction, (2) a district should establish a committee with broad membership, (3) a clear process for evaluating schools should be established, (4) data should be used to drive discussion, (5) the district needs to involve the community, (6) all involved should avoid having preconceived conclusions, (7) that a district should hire outside assistance, and (8) that the district should work to place all dislocated staff. He then said that the district had in fact realized some savings in maintenance costs by closing buildings. He closed by saying that part of the work of the task force was creating criteria trigger points (identified thresholds) such as an enrollment of 350 for elementary schools and 650 for middle schools, that they continue to refer back to and will use for future discussions.

Peg LaPlante (Englewood)

In Englewood, they consolidated two middle schools in 2006, and consolidated five elementary schools into four and restructured preschool in 2008. Their goal was to save some operational dollars to fund their strategic plan and put resources into increasing student achievement. They also had lots of empty space and did not want to be wasting funds so they also looked at efficient use of buildings. They used the same process through both rounds of consolidation and in both cases, while emotions did come up in the community; they had almost universal support for their decisions by the end. They had committee members that were well known in district, who had gone to or had students at the schools in question. She said when the community has all the facts that you will get their support. Her advice was (1) to stick to the plan and the timeframe, (2) respect all opinions, (3) not to use academics as a factor and instead focus on the buildings themselves, since the same teachers will be moving to the consolidated schools, and (4) not to be swayed by emotion. She said that the district has exceeded their savings expectations and are currently saving \$800,000 a year so far; after this last round of consolidation, they are expecting an additional \$750,000- \$1 million in savings a year. They were also able to place all their teachers, but lost some support personnel. She said that she thought they would not need to use this work in the future, because even though the process went well they do not really have any more schools to close.

Dr. Kristin Waters (DPS)

In DPS, the process has evolved and they have had to close many schools. Their #1 goal was improve student achievement and if a school closed, the option for those displaced students needed to be a better option. They also addressed the issue of capacity utilization due to declining enrollment, which also contributes to declining achievement. So it was both a performance and a financial issue for the district. She

said that there were different circumstances for each closure. The first, Manuel High School, was very challenging; the school was low performing, but had a huge history in community. However, the district felt that they could not morally keep it open. In other cases, it was declining enrollment that forced closure. Overall, they have learned that it is a very necessary process, but also very difficult. They made sure that the staff at accepting schools were very supportive to aid in the transition. They also found it to be a very political process and that they needed a lot of support at the state, civic, and community level. At one point in the closure process they had the A+ Commission, led by former mayors Pena and Webb, who rallied community support. She said that when they had them leading, it was the easiest closure process because it took pressure off of the district. She recommended that districts considering school closures should start the process as soon as possible because it takes time to update receiving facilities and to reach out to families and let them know what their options are. She also said that they should engage community organizations, reach out to principals, and make sure all district staff are on board to help. She thought it was important as well to over communicate the rationale for closures. Her final advice for the committee was to (1) resist the temptation to get over involved school by school, (2) set targets for staff meet, (3) let staff identify schools, (4) be strong, (5) turn back on negative comments, (6) be strong communicators of the rationale, and (7) make commitments to displaced students, and make sure that follow up on commitments is there. She said that the district has seen some savings, but that they have put much of the freed up resources back into the consolidated schools. They also have continuous reports out to their board about the progress of consolidated schools to make sure that students are doing better in their new schools than in the ones that were closed.

Dr. Chris King (Boulder)

In Boulder, they have closed three schools recently, a middle school and two elementary schools. They had a group looking at the issue that was a lot like this committee; they used a lot of euphemisms, like consolidation, but the point was school closure due to declining enrollment. The district had a lot of churn due to open enrollment, with schools creating specialized programs to attract students. This created negative competition between schools and created inequality and segregation. He also said that there are regional differences within the district, with a new area, with new development and new facilities, and old areas, with little growth and older buildings. During the process community members were very angry, challenging the numbers and the whole process. It was very polarizing with community members very defensive of their own schools. He said that while it's important to have a clear process, that it is also possible to over process these things. He also thought that a board with some courage was needed. He said that they have made some good decisions in their district, but have also made some others that were not as good in hindsight. They have had some financial savings, but he thought that there were political costs that

they did not consider, including loss of public support that they have not regained in certain communities. He said that the district is in a pretty good financial place right now, but thought that if they had not done this before they would be in worse shape. They sold one building, which was very contentious; used one for other district needs; and placed an alternative high school in a former middle school, which the neighborhood was not that supportive of the repurposing. He is not sure how to create a process that would calm community tensions.

Questions

Justin then invited committee members to ask the panelists any questions that they had. Committee members asked the following questions:

1. Did any of the districts consider grade configuration as an option?

The committee in Littleton discussed this early on, but as they moved through the process they decided not to look at that at the time. DPS consolidated some elementary and middle schools, but they are not sure this is a means of saving money, so it was not their focus.

2. What happened to the other schools that were closed?

In Englewood, they are trying to sell one closed middle school and they are keeping the other middle that is in a better area for possible future enrollment; they are using the closed elementary school as a preschool campus. In Littleton, they moved an existing program into one of the facilities; leasing part of a building out to the local soccer organization; using another part for staff training rooms and other district purposes; housing a couple of vocational education programs (multi-district); and letting Meals on Wheels take over the kitchen. In DPS, they are trying to sell some buildings, bring in new programs, and use them as locations for charters or ECE programs (DPS has universal preschool).

3. Are communities more receptive if facilities are reopened for programs for children?

In Littleton, this was the case once they let the community know what they were using the facilities for; community members do not want empty facilities. The district wanted to give the buildings back to the taxpayers who paid for them to be built. The community was very positive about the new uses.

4. Could the panelists characterize community feedback?

In Boulder, a lot of people thought that closing schools was the financially right thing to do and there was more support from community members from

the newer areas of the district; this did not make it easier for the impacted families though. In Englewood, they mostly had community support. One way they generated support during the consolidation of the two middle schools, which had been around a long time and were rivals, was to make part of their recommendations that the names, mascots, colors, etc. of each school be retired, and new ones generated for the new school. They did, however, keep displays of both schools' heritage at the new school so their past would not be forgotten. In Littleton, there was a lot of emotion but they tried to control rumors and reach out to all community members for support.

5. What has been the reaction of students and the impact on their performance?

In Englewood, the students took it well and they are more resilient; the teachers were taking it harder. They have not seen the academic impact yet because not enough time has passed. However, they do have lower classes, more technology and the ability to pay teachers better which should help student performance. In DPS, Manuel was very difficult and they did not do a good job the first time around anticipating student needs; they think they have gotten better with subsequent closures.

6. How was academic achievement used when considering schools?

Academic performance was not a criterion in Englewood, though they are still hopeful that this will be a benefit of the closures that they made. It was not a criterion in Littleton either, though they did discuss it. In Boulder, closures were not an academic issue; instead low enrollment was the problem. DPS did consider low performing schools for closure.

7. What would you have done differently?

In Boulder, they faced a communication challenge getting their message out which was that they were doing this to maintain fiscal stability and that it was about well being of all students. He said he thinks that people would be more receptive to this message now given the current economic situation.

8. What level of school (elementary, middle or high school) would be best/easiest to close?

In Englewood they started with middle schools and she thought that a middle school would be easier to close, because there is great neighborhood attachment to their elementaries and the high schools are flagships for the community. Kristin from DPS said that it would be hard no matter what; she said it was best just to do it, though she thought closing a high school is very

hard. Boulder Superintendent King said that it was best to look at each school case specifically; looking at some schools from a purely capacity standpoint they would be closed, but when considered more carefully they do not make sense to close (like due to transportation). He said he could not imagine closing a high school and thought it would be difficult. Littleton Superintendent Murphy said it would be best just to pick one regardless of level, though he noted that they might be looking at their middle schools again.

9. If districts resorted to closing schools after losing a bond election, do they believe that they will get community support the next time there is a bond election?

Tracie indicated that believed they would have more support next time, because before taxpayers had questioned why the district had not looked at facilities instead of asking for money and now they have done that. Peg agreed saying that the community would ask the district to do everything they could before asking for additional money. Supt. King said that closing schools showed that they were serious about financial responsibility and have already done the hard thing by closing schools. DPS has just passed the largest bond in state history so closing schools has not seemed to hurt them in bond elections.

10. Asking Boulder specifically, how did they deal with the churn from choice in and out?

By closing schools it created fewer openings at schools, which meant that families had less opportunity to choice out and were more likely to stay at their neighborhood schools and work to improve them. They are still at about 35% choice in/out, but by taking some capacity offline it has slowed the churning.

11. How can you not have specific criteria?

In Boulder, they instead needed criteria for why a school should not be closed even if it had low enrollment; it was mostly an issue of geography. Littleton created 19 different scenarios that involved all elementary schools in the district, and then out of those they considered what the best options were. By naming every elementary school, it brought out a lot of community response, which helped narrow options. As a district, they made many course corrections along the way and recognized the need to be flexible.

12. Did any district open new schools after closing others?

They did this in DPS with the redevelopment in Stapleton and in different parts of Denver where there is growth.

13. Since there is so much response once they start naming schools, when in the process should they start doing that?

In Littleton, they went into the first round of public forums without naming names, and instead just talked about criteria. As such, they knew they would have a lot more feedback and participation at the next round. Tracie thought that this was a good way to do it and that they would need to work through it one way or another. In DPS, they similarly identified criteria first and then later identified schools. Boulder developed scenarios and it was in the middle of the process before these were shared. Supt. Murphy added that once schools were named hundreds of people showed up, but that once the decision was made no one came to the next meeting which to him showed that eventually people move on.

14. How was the board involved?

Almost all of the districts presented options to the board. In Englewood, district staff made the decision then presented to the board.

15. Were closures done in a year?

It was a year process for the most closings. In DPS they are doing a phased closure of a school, but she said she thinks that families will likely move their students early since they know the school is being closed.

16. What was support for displaced staff like?

In DPS, there was a lot of support for staff; teachers were ensured that they would receive interviews at schools they were interested in and resume assistance from district Human Resources. In Englewood, teachers were asked to fill out intention sheets about what they want to do; they could request teaming with certain teachers. District staff literally considered each teacher individually and moved their names around on sticky notes to decide what school to place them at to best accommodate their requests. In Littleton, they froze the external hiring process and had teachers rank their top three choices for placement. They were able to place all full teachers, but not all probationary teachers. In Boulder, they also asked teachers for their preferred placements. Supt. King said he thought the staff part was actually the easiest and that Jeffco will benefit from being so large because they will have a lot of teaching positions become available in any given year.

In terms of the administration, for the most part it just worked out in the districts.

Communications Plan Update

Beverly Craddock and Lynn Setzer reviewed a handout about the communications plan. They explained what communication tactics they were using to inform the public about the committee's work and upcoming public forums. The handout also indicates whether these items have been completed. These tactics include internal communications methods like school newsletters (sent home or posted online), Superintendent newsletter, and parents newsletter. External communication methods included a news release, advertising on the district Web site, Your Hub, on local cable channel calendars, and Chamber of Commerce publications, among others. They also shared coverage items to date, which are listed on the handout. They then asked for any questions or suggestions.

A committee member asked if this was being advertising on the district's Facebook page, and yes it is.

Another committee member suggested putting an article or ad in the county government newsletter. They were not aware of this newsletter being open for public items, so they will look into it.

A committee member asked what sort of media coverage is expected for the public forums. They said that if they were lucky, the Denver Post will cover, expect that smaller papers will cover. Will be pitching stories to them

Additionally, talking points were also provided on the handout for committee members.

Interim Report Review

Justin said that at the September Board meeting the interim report will be presented. After that, the report will be made public, and then presentations at the public forums will be based on this report. He said that the committee will be making final recommendations in December, but the final presentation to the Board will not be until January (due to agenda opening availability). However, these recommendations will be publically available in December.

Justin asked that committee members submit their feedback no later than the end of day Wednesday.

The report is a summary of what they have done over the last seven meetings. The data is being shared through the Web site, so the report purposely does not cover everything in great detail. It is meant to be a general summary and any community members that are interested in knowing more can refer to the Web site. The report

explains (1) the committee's mission and charge, (2) what data was shared, by briefly summarizing and giving highlights, (3) what kind of criteria would you use to evaluate schools, (4) how the survey was conducted and results, and (5) the six final criteria that are being presented to the public for comment, which are:

1. Academic Achievement- not sure yet how to evaluate, but needs to be taken to community
2. Building Condition- coming out of the other committee
3. Capacity Utilization
4. School Choice
5. Current Enrollment and Enrollment Trends
6. Operating Costs

Justin then asked for any comments.

A committee member asked who the intended audience was; Justin said it was the community. She said she thought it was too dense if that was the case. She would instead like to see FAQ's and criteria on one sheet of paper because it is unlikely that anyone will read the full interim report. Justin agreed and said the general thought was that community members will come to the forums and then might go back to this if they want to know more.

Philip agreed with this, and said that he would also like to see a one page handout developed, not just an executive summary. This would give community members their own cliff notes.

A committee member added that she would still like the report to be available because she thinks that forum attendees might like to read the full report afterwards. She asked whether copies would be available. There will be some printed copies at the meetings, but they are relying heavily on the Web site.

Justin then explained how the public forums would work. He said that there would be a brief presentation then community members would be given the opportunity to speak. Each community member will be limited to a three minute timeframe. Someone will be recording their feedback on a projection screen so community members can see their feedback is being noted. The same presentation will be used at each session for consistency; this presentation will be made by a staff person who will be covering the background and then co-chairs will present the committee's work. There will be three ways for the public to give feedback: (1) get up and speak, (2) write comments on an available note card and (3) email the committee afterwards. There will also be a sign-up sheet if they want to be on a key communications e-mail list.

A committee member asked for an estimate of how many people are expected at each forum. For the first round of meetings, Justin said they would be happy if there were 50 attendees at each meeting. For the second round of meetings he would not be surprised if it was more like 200 at each meeting. He added that there is likely to be growth in audience size from meeting to meeting. Superintendent Stevenson said that most schools in Jeffco never believe they would be closed, so predicts more public involvement at second rounds once schools are named.

A committee member asked if the forums will be more of a dialogue with smaller groups of attendees. Committee staff responded that it should not be a dialogue at this point, because it could do more harm than good to have the public forums vary widely from each other. They want to be able to give every community member the same opportunity, and that would not be the case if different information was being given at different meetings. Also, the co-chairs should not be answering for the committee at this point because the committee has not completed its work.

Committee staff said it would be helpful if committee members could attend at least one of these public forums. Philip added that there is a benefit to having committee members in audience and available to community members to speak with. They might hear more comments in side conversations than what is said to the whole group. It also is important to show the community that committee members are there and want to hear their feedback. So as many meetings as they can attend the better.

Meeting Closing and Final Questions

Justin asked for any final questions or comments to close the meeting.

A committee member noted how important it is to have consistency of message, especially through informal communication channels.

Justin added that it is also important to always come back to the why, not just criteria, to make sure the community knows that the purpose of the committee to keep money in the classroom and help all students. Philip agreed and said that this needs to be stressed in talking points; it should be the first bullet point on the communications plan. He also added that all committee members need to memorize the mission because it is very important that they can communicate this well.

A committee member asked if the Web site that community members will be referred to is the same one they use. No, it is a different Web site, but it has all of the same data they have been provided with; the one exception is the last spreadsheet which is still a working document and not ready to be shared. The

committee member added that this Web site link should be included on the handout.

Philip asked that committee members look through the presentation to give feedback as if they were a community member who had not been involved before. He is looking to gather any potential questions and have some answers prepared in advance.

Justin reminded the committee that the next meeting will be after the first round of public forums on September 28th from 3:30 to 6 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:40 pm.