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Another View of the Facilities Feasibility Study Sub-Committee

November [18], 2020

The Facilities Feasibility Study Sub-Committee Report-Out raises important issues for the community. As this minority report explains:

1. During its work the Feasibility Sub-committee received no financial information.
2. Therefore, it was not able to look at cutting costs to preserve elementary schools.
3. Also, it was not able to do any work on costs either to re-configure schools or close specific elementary schools.
4. In August the Feasibility Sub-committee removed 15 of 18 original Essential Questions posed by the MAUSD Board including all questions on finances.
5. The Feasibility Sub-committee may not have respected good governance practices which the community expects of a public body by removing responsibility to evaluate the financial information, ceding that responsibility to the administration and precluding outside perspectives.
6. The Sub-committee may have exhibited a lack of transparency after the financial questions were removed by continuing to tell the community that the Sub-committee was working on finances.
7. The Feasibility Sub-committee did no work on Core Values and used the personal views of its members in place of those of the community at-large.
8. After researching the remaining 3 Essential Questions the Feasibility Sub-committee “set aside” a portion of that research because it claimed the research did not focus on kids when in fact it did and discarded research about the advantages of small schools for children and towns.
9. If it proceeds to issue the Report-Out, the Feasibility Sub-committee may set back the effort to re-build trust when the community understands what the Sub-committee did and did not do. As the Board itself recognizes “some trust has been rebuilt, but it’s a very fragile time especially as we look around the area in general and it’s important that we be thoughtful of how we proceed.” The first instance of this challenge may arise when the superintendent presents his recommendation to the Board with fiscal numbers to support whatever option he selects and the community appropriately asks: “What is the data behind those fiscal numbers?” The trust building process may have to re-start anew.

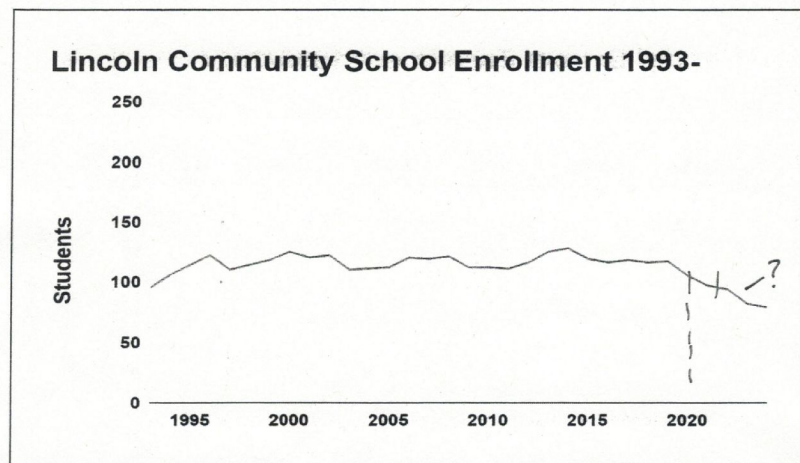
For ease of understanding, this minority report follows the format of the majority report. It includes the section names and adds paragraph numbers. Each numbered paragraph is introduced with a sentence from the Report-Out in quotation marks and italics. The underlined portion of the sentence is the subject of discussion in the minority report.

The Work

Paragraph 2 – “The Essential Questions that are part of the FFSC Charge were reviewed with the Superintendent, *stating that many of the questions consist of providing information that is readily accessible to the Administration.*” An administration always is the source of financial information for a Board or sub-committee. The role of the Board - delegated by the MAUSD Board to the Feasibility Sub-committee - is to evaluate that financial information. This is the essence of good governance of a public body. A Board never has its own financial information. The role of the Feasibility Sub-committee is to give the administration perspective on its financial information. By removing all fiscal information from the Sub-committee the community faces the anomalous situation of the administration providing financial information to itself, giving perspective on this information to itself, and deciding itself what to recommend to the Board. The community may decide that this does not reflect the good governance of a public body which it expects from MAUSD.

Here is an example of why perspective from outsiders can be important. An administrator attended a Lincoln selectboard meeting last week to hear about the importance of the Lincoln Community School in town life. As an example of the demographic challenge faced by the district the administrator reported that from 2015-2020 LCS enrollment declined and was projected to decline by 29% through 2024, the “most significant population loss” in the district.

Here is a screenshot from the Nov 2019 Community Engagement report which graphs LCS actual enrollment from 1993-2019 and projected enrollment from 2020-2024.



As can be seen the actual enrollment was virtually dead even for 27 years from 1993 to 2019. It appears there may have been a decline in the last year or two which was within the normal fluctuation of the preceding quarter century. Yet that decline apparently was extrapolated to project a 29% decline going forward. If this reading of the graph is correct, Lincoln in fact has the most stable enrollment in the district, not the most significant decline.

This kind of misperception can happen to any administrator with any kind of data - demographic or financial. An outsider looks at the data with fresh eyes, even if with less institutional expertise. It is no reflection on an administrator, it is a reflection on being human.

So good governance requires separation between administration and oversight. And good governance is all the more crucial when some alternatives under consideration might cut administration jobs, including the job of superintendent or the jobs of colleagues and friends, because, as the Notes from Virtual Town Halls indicate, eliminating a Central Office could produce “significant savings.”

Paragraph 2 – “The result is that there are three questions remaining that the Superintendent asked the FFSC to provide a perspective on.” Fifteen original Essential Questions were removed from the work of the Sub-committee. This was primarily because the administration is the source of financial information.

Yet the community was not informed that in August the crucial financial questions were transferred to the administration. The community was told that the Sub-committee was continuing to work on these fiscal issues:

- The community was told in [MAUSD Video Shorts #2](#) in October that the Sub-committee is “considering ... operating, maintenance and renovations costs of each building” The Facilities Sub-committee was given no financial or other information and did no work on operating, maintenance and renovations costs of each building.
- At the October 12 meeting the Board was told that the Sub-committee is "Working on two 'activities' - one is the charge questions re: logistics and costs" The Facilities Sub-committee did no work on charge questions regarding costs.
- The [Notes from Virtual Town Halls](#) on October 14 and 20 record that “The administration will make more specific recommendations about which schools to close after hearing from the Facilities Feasibility Study Committee....” The Facilities Sub-committee received no fiscal information relevant to closing specific schools.
- As recently as November 12, 2020 the *Addison Independent* quotes the superintendent as saying in an email “I think the subcommittee did a good job getting up to speed with the complexity of our fiscal challenges.” No getting up to speed was required; no fiscal information was shared with the Facilities Sub-committee.

The community might feel that these statements lacked transparency.

Paragraph 2 – *“The combined inputs received for review of CQ-1 centered on the advantages and disadvantages regarding small schools vs. large schools vs. town schools and/or that of consolidation, not of the impact to kids as described.... The question was also changed to read ‘What are the advantages to kids, and ~~what are the advantages to a town,~~ of keeping all elementary schools in the towns where the kids reside? to enhance this aspect.’”* Focus on kids, of course, is the ultimate purpose of our schools. Nonetheless the community might conclude that re-writing revised Essential Question No. 1 to exclude relevant research on kids, small schools and towns, explained below, was not appropriate.

However, the information supplied to address CQ-1 (revised Essential Question No. 1) is equally relevant in considering original Essential Question No. 18: “What are the advantages of maintaining small schools? What does the research say about this.” Essential Question No. 18 is qualitatively similar to the remaining 3 Essential Questions. Nonetheless it was removed from the Sub-committee and re-assigned to the administration even though the six research papers relied on (see Footnote 3) are not information within the exclusive possession of the administration.

Paragraph 3 – “The CEC ‘Tool to assess impact of decisions on Core Values,’ a perception of cost, and the 3 Charge Essential Questions were the basis of considerations by the FFSC.” The Draft Report-Out is the first time the term “perception of cost” has been used in the Sub-committee. It does not appear in the Essential Questions. It does not appear in the minutes of the Board or the Sub-committee. It did not come up in any Sub-committee meetings. It does not show up in the matrix which refers to “Dollars,” not “Perceived Dollars.” The community may decide that closing their local schools based on “perception of cost” is an insufficient basis of decision. Rather the community may expect that a body independent of the

administration should evaluate “actual costs.” The Board cannot recommend that citizens close local schools based on “perceptions of cost.”

Paragraph 3 – “An Options Matrix was developed to help quantify the advantages and disadvantages of each option.” The matrix included three categories each of which is discussed below:

- *fiscal information* on operating (excluding facilities)¹, maintenance, and renovation costs (“Dollars”)
 - sub-committee member’s personal views of *Core Values*² (“Programming”)
 - answers to the remaining 3 *Essential Questions* (“Bricks and Mortar”)
- *Fiscal information (“Dollars”)*. The Facilities Sub-committee was asked to complete the matrix with financial information it did not have. The Sub-committee was asked to quantify the impact of operating, maintenance, and renovation costs on various school configurations. The majority report to evaluate fiscal information/ dollars does not contain a single number or dollar sign.

The Sub-committee has seven members, four are voting, and only three completed the matrix on fiscal information. The minority member did not respond to the fiscal questions “Because we had no information on costs I recorded my responses in this section as ‘No Data.’” Rather than recording that response the Sub-committee treated the minority as not having participated. It was unclear how the majority made its evaluations of operating, maintenance, and renovation costs with No Data. For the first time the community now is learning that the majority view may have been based on “perceptions of cost.”

- *Core values (“Programming”)*. Video No. 2 told the community that the Sub-committee is “considering academic programming” which refers to the Core Values. The Sub-committee did no work on Core Values. The Sub-committee applied the Core Values of four committee members in place of the Core Values of the community.

A second crucial question about Core Values is the situation in which the community actually finds itself: what does the community believe when the Core Value of “Town Schools” is placed in the balance with all other Core Values. The community could learn in the upcoming survey that “Town Schools” exert a disproportionate yet appropriate weight. If so, the Facilities Sub-committee, the Engagement Committee and the Board will have invested valuable time and money developing unworkable alternatives.

- *3 Essential Questions (“Bricks and Mortar”)*. Because the minority member is neither an educator nor a public administrator, to aid the Sub-committee to consider the remaining 3 Essential

¹ It is unclear why facilities costs are excluded since they are part of what the Sub-committee was formed to study.

² Core Values are: academic excellence, equity (fairness), socially and emotionally healthy kids, community connections, varied and flexible programming, student-led personalized learning, educators, and town schools. They were identified in meetings held in the Autumn of 2019 by the Community Engagement Committee.

Questions he read half a dozen academic journal articles³ on the subjects of these Questions. The articles identified considerable support, and also liabilities, for small rural schools for towns, schools and kids. While there are pros and cons on each, a preponderance of the research appears to favor small schools as more consistent with our communities' Core Values.

However, most of this research on the advantages of small schools for kids was "set aside" by the Sub-committee because it was said the research was focused on "pros and cons of town schools vs. small schools vs. consolidating" and not on "kids personally." In fact the research originally compiled does include advantages and disadvantages both for kids and towns. A sample of the findings by experts which was discarded by the Sub-committee includes:

Advantages for kids

Research says that smaller schools tend to have:

- Lower student-teacher ratio
- Improved instructional methods including student-centered instruction, cross-age grouping, and cooperative learning
- Close student-teacher relations
- Greater chance for student participation in extracurricular activities
- Higher student achievement, especially for at-risk students
- Less bureaucratic and more flexible administrative structures which allow greater communication between administrators and teachers
- Greater focus on educational "basics" [3R's]
- Higher morale amongst students and teachers and less teacher stress
- More flexible and may more easily adopt new instructional methods/education reforms
- higher number of students taking academic courses
- closer community connections
- positive attitude toward school
- fewer social behavior problems
- greater feelings of belongingness
- healthier interpersonal relations
- better attendance
- lower dropout rate
- better self-concept
- more success in college
- Generally small schools lead to greater cognitive and affective development among all students, especially among disadvantaged students.
- Students from less affluent communities appear to have better achievement in small schools.
- Large schools have recognized the benefits of small schools by creating "schools within schools" as a method to capture some of the advantages of smallness.

³ Rural School Consolidation: History, Research Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations, *Rural Educator*, Joe Bard, Clark Gardener, Regi Wieland, Volume 27, Number 2, pp. 40-48; Does School District Consolidation Cut Costs? *Education Finance and Policy*, William Duncombe and John Yinger, Volume 2, pp. 341-375, Fall 2007; The Effects of School District Consolidation on Educational Cost and Quality, *Public Finance Review*, Nora Gordon and Brian Knight (National Bureau of Economic Research), Volume 36, Number 4, pp 408-430, (2008); School Consolidation: A qualitative case study on the importance of identity in a rural environment (2019), *Graduate Dissertation*, Burrack, Sue Ellen, <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/17653>; What Every Policy Maker, School Leader, Parent and Community Member Needs to Know about the Social, Economic and Human Capital Costs of Closing a Rural School, *PhD Thesis*, Ruth Anne Buzzard, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1808515598>; The Advantages of Small Rural Schools, Final Report to the Idaho Rural Schools Association, James M. Kearney, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED373934.pdf>.

In addition to discarding the expert findings of advantages the Sub-committee introduced as “Advantages,” for example, that:

“All five towns are economically stable enough to continue with or without a local school.” [No supporting research was offered.]

“Even though frequently referred to as the ‘glue’ that holds a town together school closure has limited exposure. The potential impact primarily affects families with elementary school age students, leaving the majority of town residents unaffected.” [Supporting research was offered for the “glue” proposition; no supporting research was offered for the “limited impact” proposition. Moreover, the Board and School Leadership of MAUSD specifically have found: “Town Schools ... are the heart of the community, the glue that holds the community together. There is an interdependent relationship between town and school.”]

So that the community can compare the differing majority and minority responses, three attachments include the Essential Questions prepared by the Sub-committee paired with the Essential Questions prepared principally from research by the minority ([Attachment 13](#), [Attachment 14](#), [Attachment 15](#)).

Paragraph 3 - “*The Matrix was designed as a higher level analysis tool* with responses given as “-” for a negative impact, “0” as a neutral impact, and “+” for a positive impact.” The Board and community are not looking for higher level analysis. They are expecting a deep dive into the nitty gritty of school finances to see where savings can be found, exercising inside-the-box knowledge and outside-the-box imagination to preserve or re-configure our schools. The superintendent will use the Sub-committee’s work to make a specific recommendation about how to proceed.

Paragraph 3 - “All committee members found *completing the Options Matrix a challenge* for various reasons, reinforcing the complexity of the issue being considered.” The matrix is an attempt to quantify qualitative judgments. It might be useful as a table to list school configuration options (“buckets”) and relevant considerations of values, costs, and Essential Questions.

But that does not mean it is workable as a spreadsheet to calculate school closings. The problem may be that two components are values-based (Core Values and Essential Questions) which are not readily quantifiable; nonetheless the values-based components were to be given numbers. One component was quantitative, but the Sub-committee had no quantitative data. Then the numbers for values-based components were to be added to the numbers from the quantitative component for which there were no quantities. These numbers were to be averaged and the product was to produce school closings. In short the matrix may have been a challenge to complete because it is unsuited to the task for which it was being used.

Paragraph 3 - “*Not all committee members completed all aspects of the Matrix.*” In Appendix A are matrices for only two Sub-committee members; two others are not included.

Paragraph 3 - “There are *anomalies* with some of the ranking of items in the Options Matrix, likely resulting from how the rankings were interpreted. This can specifically be seen for the Charge Scenario I line with the “red” for the Impact of Closing a School on a Community/Town item.” Indeed there are anomalies such as this one in which the matrix finds almost no impact of closing a school on a community/town.

Paragraph 4 - Buckets 1, 2 and 3 - The minority did not affirmatively select any options - not because it opposed all the options - but because it had no financial information on any option. There was no basis on which to make a selection. And there was the risk that by affirmatively selecting an option which included consideration of "Dollars," the minority would imply to the community that the Sub-committee had financial information which it did not have. Nonetheless the minority makes these observations on options in case any are helpful.

Bucket 1 - Operate 6 Schools - Charge Option I - The very first original Essential Question asked: "What is the cost of maintaining our current facilities? For how long can we financially afford to keep them all open and appropriately staffed?" One would have expected that the Sub-committee would have started its work by evaluating every conceivable change which might be made in our local elementary schools to keep them open. This never was done (but still could be a first order of business for the future).

In the fall 2019 Community Engagement meetings participants understood that keeping open all elementary schools would necessitate changes. The community is open to and understands the fiscal need for changes. The Sub-committee and Board could embrace this openness and invite the community to propose changes which might contribute to reducing costs and preserving local elementary schools. If that process does not sufficiently reduce costs, the community could be invited to propose changes which might contribute to reducing costs and re-configuring district schools.

Community connections may be more drastically impacted by elementary school closing in towns without a general store.

NESDEC proposed that it could be advantageous for "Potential utilization of vacated elementary facilities by collaborative programs, municipal and civic organizations." NESDEC did not recognize that in smaller towns like Lincoln and Starksboro there may not be sufficient programs and organizations to take as much (or any) space offered at LCS and Robinson. This could have a negative cost impact if the vacant space still must be paid for and operated.

Bucket 2 - Brick and Mortar Reconfiguration - Charge Option IIA (also NESDEC Option 3) - Because the Facilities Sub-committee had no financial data and did no work on individual elementary schools it can provide no input on which three elementary schools should be closed and which two should be preserved.

Bucket 3 - Partner with ANWSD - NESDEC Option B - If 3 or 4 elementary schools are closed there may be a bigger construction budget to renovate the surviving elementary school(s). For example, a single elementary school with pre-kindergarten through 6 would require an elementary school large enough for all 700 MAUSD elementary kids. Bristol elementary already is the largest so presumably would require the least additional construction. But it has the least additional land available so may be least viable for expansion.

Closing a town school and at the same time asking to approve a bond to build/enlarge another school may be a political challenge. The Facilities Sub-committee was told that the administration does not foresee the need for a bond to make the adjustments contemplated by these options. If the administration's foresight is not correct and a bond is needed, how might that same amount be spent to preserve elementary schools?

Considerations of Note

The option which does not seem to be under consideration and which seems most nearly to reflect the communities' Core Values would be retaining all five elementary schools and consolidating the middle

and high schools of MAUSD and ANWSD in two locations with one middle school in Vergennes or Bristol and one high school in the other. So it might be helpful to see the costs and net outcome of this reconfiguration. Similarly, the Essential Questions also raised the option of “not operating a middle and high school at all” and tuitioning our kids; the net effect of this also might be interesting.

Conclusion

Where does this leave the Sub-committee? In short, in a hole. But the community still needs answers.

First, we could return to the charge of 18 Essential Questions which the Board originally gave us. Unfortunately we are in November 2020 largely where we were in 2019 except for the three research questions on which the Sub-committee worked. Fortunately one year is not going to break the district financially. Though we cannot know the legislative outcome, the Notes from Virtual Town Halls indicate that the legislature is considering holding towns harmless from the spending cap for the next year.

Second, with cost data provided by the administration the Sub-committee could undertake an analysis of the changes needed to be made at local elementary schools to preserve them, if they can be preserved. If they cannot be preserved, we can show the community the numbers why not.

Thus far we have been provided little information and so there is little guidance we can offer on which voters can decide to close their elementary school or the district can decide how to proceed with regard to our middle and high schools. To continue on this constrained path may spend more of the district’s limited resources – human, financial and trust - in what may prove an indeterminate community exercise.

Jeff Meller