

Feb. 20 School Board meeting



School Strife

Eastside parents 'beat up' their teachers over merger

Teachers at Eastside alternative elementary may no longer want to work at the school after the school's parents verbally abused them for discussing a merger with the poorer and browner Harris neighborhood elementary, according to 4J Superintendent George Russell.

"I worry now how Eastside can be Eastside if half or more of the teachers are deciding they don't want to be Eastside," Russell said at a School Board meeting March 8.

"It's not right for the teachers to get beat up by parents," Russell said of the Eastside teachers who have supported talking with Harris teachers about a merger or some other collaborative hybrid. Harris is 67 percent free and reduced lunch (FRL) and 25 percent Latino, while Eastside is 5 percent FRL and 1 percent Latino.

Russell said given the opposition of Eastside parents to a merger with Harris, he may want to close both schools. "Probably the way I feel now, I'd make a recommendation to close them both."

Several School Board members shared Russell's dismay at the parents at Eastside, one of the whitest and wealthiest schools in the entire state. "I was disheartened by what

I heard from the parents of Eastside," said board member Alicia Hays. "I don't think Eastside is viable because I don't think they are going to be able to diversify."

"To the extent there is an exodus of teachers, that suggests to me a viability question," said board member Craig Smith. The merger/collaboration offered Eastside parents the opportunity to show their "good faith" commitment to diversify, Smith said. "What we're hearing is they don't want to do that."

Some board members said they would like Russell to meet with the teachers to see if the merger still has any chance of success. Board member Yvette Webber-Davis said, "I think there is at least some sentiment on the board for trying to give Eastside and Harris a chance."

But board members expressed concern that the apparent threat to close Harris but not Eastside if the merger failed would make merger negotiations between the two schools unequal.

Board member Charles Martinez said it is "untenable" if the board is saying that if Eastside parents won't agree to the merger, "Harris, you're closed and Eastside, this is your building."

Board member Smith shared the concern.

"The net effect is they [Eastside parents] can do what they want. That outcome is bothersome to me."

"I am concerned here that one side has more power," board member Jim Torrey said. As it stands now a small group of Eastside parents can say, "It doesn't work, it doesn't work, it doesn't work," and they win." Torrey said. "That doesn't feel good to me."

But board member Eric

Forrest said he'd already made up his mind. "I think the right thing to do is to close Harris." Forrest argued that the south Eugene area has too many school buildings for the number of students. He suggested that the board close the Harris building and move Eastside and Fox Hollow to the old Willard building, displacing 400 charter school students.

Torrey suggested moving Eastside to the old Bailey Hill school building in west Eugene. He said moving the alternative school to that location would do more to diversify it than the Harris site in South Eugene. "I don't sense we're going to get the diversity there."

Russell questioned if Eastside could be viable as a stand-alone school with only 145 students. He noted that Parker parents and staff had complained about friction in co-locating with the school, and Fox Hollow representatives had said they feared the same result if they were forced to co-locate with Eastside.

The board spent most of the three-hour meeting on March 8 discussing the Harris-Eastside quandary. On other "Schools of the Future" recommendations to keep Coburg elementary open and deny most school transfers to South Eugene High School and Roosevelt Middle School, the board appeared largely in agreement.

Two board members, however, suggested that Adams neighborhood Elementary may

need to be closed, something Russell did not recommend.

Smith noted that Adams, at 186 students, does not meet the district's enrollment target of 300. "Does Adams continue to be a viable school?" he asked.

Torrey said the district should tell the school it is at jeopardy if proposals to increase enrollment fail. "If this doesn't work, you are potentially on the block."

Forrest said that kind of talk could hurt efforts to attract more parents to the school. "We need to be careful of the language we use."

Martinez said there is no agenda to close the school, which is 59 percent FRL. "I wouldn't want the Adams community to fear that."

The school district has a history of targeting schools with higher percentages of FRL, a common measure of poverty, for closure. The closure choice, however, may be indirect.

State data and widely accepted educational research indicate that schools with higher FRL tend to have lower test scores due to the frequent challenges of teaching kids in poverty. In turn, the higher-income parents who tend to shop for schools in Eugene's choice system often choose schools with higher test scores on state published report cards. That leaves the schools with more poor students with declining enrollment and subject to closure.

Alternative school parents have pointed to test scores and enrollment as measures of their school's success and lack of success at some neighborhood schools. But the scores and subsequent enrollment shifts may be more a factor of demographics than bad teaching or curriculum, according to Steve Slater, a testing analyst with the Oregon Dept. of Education.

Slater said a given school's test scores can often be largely predicted by the FRL and other demographic factors such as student mobility, English language learners and attendance. "They tend to be predictors that are significant," Slater said. "It's fairly accurate. The ranks are stable from one year to the next."

"I would hope there would be other factors besides the test scores," Slater said of what's going on in Eugene with choice and school closures. "It's kind of a sad situation." **EW**

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