

Date : 2/15/2024 1:45:34 PM

From : "George Sieburg"

To : "Jason Seickel"

Cc : "amy.ray@acsgmail.net" , "james.carter@acsgmail.net" , "liza.kelly@acsgmail.net" , "rebecca.strimer@acsgmail.net" , "sarah.thornburg@acsgmail.net" , "jesse.warren@acsgmail.net" , "maggie.fehrman@acsgmail.net" , "middleschoolreconfigurationfeedback@acsgmail.net" , "Erin Seickel"

Subject : Re: Correspondence on school community

Dear Jason:

Thank you for your thoughtful and carefully researched email. I appreciate that you recognize the funding shortfalls we're facing alongside the need to adequately support and pay our educators. I also appreciate your thoughts about community assets.

I am grateful for your continued interest and advocacy for our district.

Yours in community,

On Mon, Feb 12, 2024 at 9:20â€PM Jason Seickel <jason.seickel@gmail.com> wrote:

To: ACS School Board

Cc: Dr. Fehrman

From: Jason Seickel

Subject: District resources as it relates to school reconfiguration

Date: 2/12/2024

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Greetings,

My name is Jason Seickel and I am writing this correspondence in regards to potential board decisions related to school reconfigurations and district financial sustainability.

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Relevant Personal Background:

Former teacher, instructional coach, and teacher mentor.Â The district I taught in, Orange County Public Schools, and specifically my first school prided itself on implementing evidenced based strategies and as a result I was lucky enough to start my teaching career in an atmosphere that cultivated teacher efficacy and promoted evidenced based teaching strategies.

Currently I am a parent of a 6th grader at Montford North Star and a 3rd grader at Claxton elementary school and a future Kindergartener at Claxton.

Understanding of District Concerns:

The district is seeking to move toward financial sustainability.Â With declining enrollment and the loss of COVID related monies and state support (holding funding steady regardless of pupil numbers), this burden is emphasized.

Thoughts:

1.Â Evidence based does not always preclude emotion- As I have seen in the initial introduction of the board's considerations, the input session, following campaigns, neighborhood murmurs, the board meeting, and following, there is undoubtedly a lot of emotion surrounding the potential closure of a beloved neighborhood school.Â As I heard Amy Ray state in the most recent board meeting, that this decision needs to be made devoid of emotion and thus comment prior should attempt to also be devoid of emotion, I was left feeling in agreement.Â The reason for this is, in the attempt to reduce emotion in an effort to look for solutions (solution oriented), not all emotion would be lost of course.Â Emotion right now IS too high for reasonable solutions to be heard, but that does not mean that emotion should be weighted against the emotional, for there is cause for the emotions that may in fact be influenced by science, fact, and reason.

The following question was inferred at the last board meeting: "Would not the students of any school react with emotion if their school was closing?"Â The answer is no.Â In fact more emotion, in this case more fear, means the students feel there is much to lose.Â Not all students at all schools feel this way.Â I have been witness to school closings as a teacher and been in board rooms during discussions much like the one we are having now back in 2009, during the great recession when 4 small schools were considered for closure.Â Two of those schools had strong feelings and the other two did not, simply because there was little school community at those schools.

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Personally, I have been criticized for being devoid of emotion, which provides me benefits in this situation, but I have had to grow and learn that emotion can be a data point.

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2.Â The view of assets in a school system- Often times I have seen the assets of a school system viewed as individual pieces, and this is valid to a degree, until it overwrites the view of collectives, networks, or interconnected systems as assets.Â For example, a school building is an asset of course.Â Closing a building saves on overhead costs associated with that building.Â A bus is an asset; removing a bus from circulation could be offset by increased routes for the remaining. But what is often overlooked is a school community as an asset.Â If we view the parts as assets ignoring the network, we may not see the forest through the trees.Â Each individual teacher is an asset, but when a collective of teachers works well together under the leadership of a supportive and driven leadership, an invaluable large asset emerges, and that is a high functioning school community.Â From my experience, but MOST importantly from research, these are the best assets a school district has.Â These assets can become the backbone for a district's competitive strength academically and socially.

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Data: I am sure you are all aware of the plethora of data related to student achievement and may also be aware of several meta studies combining such data, but I have attached one for clarity.

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This data was seemingly revolutionary upon its release in 2009, but not a huge surprise to teachers, that the teacher was the number one driver for student success. However, beyond the individual teacher and all their strategies that made larger impacts than class size, small group pull-outs and any other school or even home impacts, the single largest impact on student performance is collective teacher efficacy. And let me tell you, from my and my wife's experience in 9 different schools, building strong collective teacher efficacy is a hard thing to do.

Montford North Star's community may be one of Asheville City School's biggest assets, and I would recommend building on this.

Evidence of collective teacher efficacy: As in the presumption of the knowledge of evidence based influences on student performance, I also assume this board is aware of the NCDPI's Teacher's working conditions survey or school climate survey. Knowing that, from evidence, that teachers are the strongest asset of a district, and by also showing this with the board's commitment to support, I am hopeful that all board members have reviewed the climate surveys for all the schools in the district, as these are a great view into the inner workings of each school as a system.

I am going to pull one piece of data (no substitute for reviewing the full surveys) from the most recent survey for this correspondence:

Q10.6 "Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn."

Asheville High School- 89%

Asheville Middle School- 58%

Claxton Elementary- 92%

Hall Fletcher Elementary- 92%

Ira B Jones Elementary- 81%

Isaac Dickson Elementary- 70%

Lucy S. Herring Elementary- 58%

Montford North Star Academy- 100%

School of Inquiry and Life Sci.- 67%

District Average- 72%

State Average- 85%

3. The benefit of school choice- This district is unique in that it offers school choice. One benefit that makes it competitive in the rising climate of parents looking for choice and seeking it in charter schools. Currently choice at the middle school level is an advantage. By removing or consolidating the middle schools, this choice, either factually or by perception, would be removed. No actual choice will remain. Anecdotally this would appear to accelerate the decline of enrollment leading to future hard questions and potential district consolidation. For a point of reference, my anecdotal evidence is from conversation with neighbors and parents at both Claxton and Ira B. Jones and of course my own concerns for my 3rd grader. More data is needed here.

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Solutions Oriented Suggestions:

Let me be candid, I am not a specialist in this manner, but want to be as supportive as I can, so feel free to note any or all of my suggestions as not feasible or already considered.

Larger items:

1. Consider building on the district's assets.

- Could Montford k-8 be a possibility? I understand there would be up front cost.

- Could Schools with high success advertise more/better to increase enrollment?

- Not to rule out moving Montford into AMS, identify ways to do this and preserve collective teacher efficacy, school culture and image (including PR) prior to making any decision. Work with the teachers.

- Work with teachers on solutions as impacts to the teachers have huge impacts on student success.

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2. Combine elementary schools. Combining elementary schools would not have the same impact on choice and arguable enrollment. I understand this has been discussed at high level.

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3. Reduce staff. I am a former teacher and my wife is a Buncombe county school teacher and I would not normally advocate for reducing staff, however the argument at hand is about student achievement, student enrollment and financial sustainability. Has the central office looked for deep cuts on the order that the district is asking of its parents and students? Incentivizing retirements might help here.

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4. Could the central office be housed in a school? I agree closing a building will reduce a significant amount of cost.

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Smaller items to buy time (many hands make light work). An audit may reveal which if any of the following might help:

1. Make full use of rentable space. Rent as many facilities as the market will allow outside of school hours.

2. Continue to increase the energy efficiencies of all district facilities.

3. Consider outsourcing more non-educational functions.

4. Go paperless.

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Conclusion:

At the end of the day, I would request that the board consider the district's assets not only as its parts, but the sum of the parts and the systems of some parts, and collectives of other parts. Communities are where we live work and play and school communities are what people look for when making choices about where their kids will spend 35 hours a week to go to school. Some schools have more community than others and ACS should be proud of its Montford North Star Academy community, because in the school's short life, it has reached amazing successes and 100% agreement among a 100% response rate that it is in fact a "good school to work and learn."

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Thank you,
Jason Seickel
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George Sieburg
Asheville City Schools Board Chair
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