

MAYOR'S NOTES

Setting a Balanced and Clear Path

The Guilderland School Board met last week to discuss the results of a summit held a month earlier. Board members spent considerable time interpreting the record sheets of ideas garnered from summit volunteers who provided solutions for the revenue shortages experienced by the school in the last several years. Based on my observations of their reactions and ideas, the Board's deliberations seem to have shifted to consider other promising revenue solutions rather than closing schools which was the sole active recommendation of a controversial study released in June.

The suggested next steps and timeline, apparently to be fleshed out by the Board's Communication subcommittee, are to be discussed at the next Board meeting. It appears that select topics may be taken up for further study, including repurposing a school's extra space for such things as hosting pre-kindergarten classes, looking at recruiting international students, establishing intergenerational programs, and investigating school/town relationships to better market the schools. Some Board members also suggested that they need staff help in determining the underlying reliability of the consultant's conclusions regarding future enrolment declines, especially if they might be used to close a school, as well as professional help with other program topics. The Board is still wrestling with considering school closure as only a last resort especially in light of some members' critique of the consultant study for not first looking at other options.

Although a series of possible next steps for the wide-ranging suggestions were identified, Superintendent Marie Wiles and Assistant Superintendent Neil Sanders cautioned that staff resources are limited for the work that's envisioned. They contended that the Board should provide some priority to the staff assignments. The tension between identifying future work and whether there is enough time to devote staff to such work provided an interesting dynamic while Board members tried to hone the topics down to a manageable few. Some felt the list was "complete" whereas others thought it "too ambitious." For example, Board President Barbara Fratterigo proposed removing the Princeton model, which would group schools by grade level, from further discussion, but Board member O'Connell felt it should still be looked at even if it meant closing a school. Board member Allen Simpson went so far as to suggest closing more than one school, which was dismissed by Gloria Towle-Hilt as an approach that would undermine the district's prevailing philosophy.

Most striking was that that the administration provided little or no real public analyses of the results of the summit or advice on the most promising options discussed. Although some Board members provided extensive feedback, professional staff was not engaged actively, except for raising concerns about

the amount of work required and sometimes steering the conversation back to closing a school as a viable option. Despite these concerns, several Board members expressed the need to collect more hard data, to ensure the legal parameters of any decisions, and to assure that options be investigated which would provide the most benefit to the school district.

Board members expressed their desire to draw on community expertise to help with analysis of these topics and indicated that 'letters of invitation' would go out to the community to ask them to join the conversation. I am not sure what that means since the conversation thus far has largely been public input and advice from the Board. I was pleased that Superintendent Wiles insisted that staff must be involved since they "live the reality." Frankly, until we hear from the professional educators in the district, especially feedback from the teachers of our students and from its union organization, we will be limited to opinions held by the public which will need to be tempered sooner or later by the advice and recommendations of the educators who know the best programmatic solutions.

Board member Catherine Barber pointed out that solutions need to take into account criteria other than efficiency measures that achieve solely cost savings, but rather embrace programmatic improvements that affect the district's effectiveness as well. I hope that the Board will pursue a path that is balanced and clear, outlined in a defined time line, and does not squander precious time to compete for revenue with new initiatives in the areas of technology and early childhood education. I trust that the direction is one that is taken with the active and public involvement of the professional staff as well as the interested residents of the district.

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