

# Small Student Population Has Sea Isle City Eying Ways to Save

By JOE HART

SEA ISLE CITY — Combining grades, closing off a section of the school and reducing staff were all parts of Superintendent Warren Benedetto's proposal of how to manage the district's growing financial concerns and shrinking enrollment.

On Jan. 23, Benedetto explained to the board of education that with a projected enrollment of 80 students next year the current way of doing things is not feasible for the future.

His plan suggests combining grades pre-kindergarten with kindergarten, first with second, third with fourth, fifth with sixth and seventh with eighth.

Benedetto also proposed abandoning the wing of the school currently housing the library and various other classrooms and offices and moving them to other areas in the building.

"We can shut off utilities to that section and move the facilities to other rooms opened up by combining classes," he said.

Most controversially, his proposals include a reduction of staff.

According to Benedetto's plan, the districts staffing needs for the coming year will be 12 full-time positions including: seven classroom teachers, three special education teachers, one basic skills/enrichment/guidance position, and one nurse/health position.

He also saw a need for three full-time equivalent positions for special areas, three teaching assistants for pre-K through fourth grades and four special education personal aides.

Bottom line, two non-tenured teachers in the school will not have jobs with the district next year.

"I hate to see the district lose good young teachers," said substitute teacher Lisa Iannone who was in attendance at the meeting with other district teachers.

"After hearing of this plan, the teachers without tenure are going to start looking for new jobs in other districts," she continued.

Benedetto agreed that they could lose some teachers in the process, but said, "It's a problem that I acknowledge, but cannot solve."

Other teachers posed questions.

"When will the board make a decision on the proposed plan?" wondered third-grade teacher Jen Homer. "Will it be by the next meeting?"

Benedetto thought the decision should be soon because he and district business administrator Earl Vassallo need to start working on the budget.

"We'll need to agree on a plan before we start doing the numbers," Vassallo agreed.

"Is the superintendent's plan all-or-nothing?" Theresa Arsenaault, another educator, wanted to know.

She wondered if the board could change Benedetto's proposal or if it was written in stone.

Benedetto said this was the plan he was suggesting the board accept, but it requires their approval so he would listen to any input they had.

He said with the current push by the state to combine city and education services and reduce real estate taxes, local districts and municipalities are being forced to make some difficult choices.

"It was a long and difficult process," he said. "Ideally, I would rather not combine classes, but given our situation, I see no other choice."

Still another teacher, looking for a glimmer of hope, suggested the possibility that the consolidation of Catholic schools in the area might have a positive impact on the district's enrollment.

She said she understood the almost 50 diocesan

schools in this cluster will be reduced to around 12 schools leaving the parents of those children to decide where to send them.

In related business, board member Matt McCallum reported on a meeting he attended with county freeholders about a proposed county school board.

He said it was part of the state's desire to reduce taxes by consolidating and combining services.

"By the conversation at the meeting, it sounds like the freeholders are against it," he concluded.

The board also is reviewing information for a feasibility study Sea Isle City is having done.

Each member picked a chapter to read and report on back to the board, fighting over the smaller sections.

Heather Baldini, not in attendance, was given a pretty substantial section.

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