

Sea Isle School shrinks: Fewer

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SEA ISLE CITY - The Sea Isle City school district is shrinking.

That is the projection for the 2007-08 school year, according to current Chief School Administrator Warren Benedetto. Based on those projections, presented to the school board at its January meeting, the tiny school will be getting smaller in the number of students, staff and square footage.

Figures show the anticipated resident student enrollment will drop to a low of 76 students for the next school year. Including possible tuition students from other

districts, the enrollment may reach 84, but that is still a significant drop in percentage from the current school year.

Coinciding with the drop in enrollment comes an anticipated drop in staffing needs. Benedetto presented a plan to combine classes, pairing up grades from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade.

Several of those grades are combined in the current school year. First and second grade are combined, as are fifth and sixth grades, although fifth and sixth are departmentalized and still have separate teachers.

In 2007-08, the co-mingled classes would include pre-kindergarten with kindergarten; first and second

grade, third and fourth grade and fifth and sixth. Seventh and eighth grade would be separate.

Eighth grade has the largest anticipated enrollment next year, with a projected 13 resident students. Each of the other grades have projected enrollments of less than 10 students, with the lowest for next year being sixth grade, with four students.

Anticipated staffing for next year includes 12 full-time positions, including 11 teachers and a combined school nurse/health teacher. Also anticipated are the equivalent of three full-time special area teachers (covering physical education, art, music, Spanish and technology), three teaching aides and four special education aides.

That brings the average to more than one full-time staff member for every four students, including projected tuition students. Administrative positions would bring that average even lower.

Building shrinks

The school building itself will be shrinking in square footage, according to Benedetto's plan.

Benedetto said he is advising that the school board approve closing of what he calls "Annex One," which includes a teacher's room, child study team rooms, special education classroom, speech and guidance.

Benedetto said closing that area is necessary because of the poor structural condition of the building. He said external areas of the annex can be seen to be rotting and he anticipates similar problems could exist on the interior of the building.

Water stains mark carpeting and ceiling tiles throughout that area of the building. Benedetto said although no testing has been done on the interior of the building, it is likely that conditions on the outside of the building extend to the inside.

In addition to structural issues, Benedetto said, the school district would realize financial savings by closing Annex One. He said all utilities, including heat, air conditioning and electric, would be turned off.

Some electrical would have to remain turned on, however, because of requirements tied to the fire alarm system.

By turning off the heat and air conditioning, Benedetto acknowledged the interior condition of that section of the building would likely deteriorate further. He said the current or future school board would have to take action at some point to disassemble and remove the

Annex One portion of the building. He said it is beyond what he would consider repairable.

An area Benedetto referred to as "Annex Two" would remain in use. That four-room corridor that uses the same access entryway from the main part of the school building as Annex One, is earmarked as a teacher's room, guidance, conference room and the child study team office. Benedetto said the heating and other utilities systems are separate for Annexes One and Two.

Heading into the school budget season of February and March, Benedetto did not offer any estimates regarding savings realized by either the combining of classes or the closing of Annex One.

As preliminary budget figures have not been presented, it is also not known if the school board will budget funds to remove Annex One.

Declining enrollment

Regarding the declining enrollment, Benedetto said he is not familiar enough with state law S1701, which ties permitted administrative costs to enrollment, to know the impact it will have on the 2007-08 budget. He referred those questions to Business Administrator Earl Vasallo.

Vasallo said a smaller enrollment would definitely impact the allowed administrative costs in the budgeting process. He explained that S1701 allows a certain dollar amount to be spent in the administrative area, based on a per-pupil cost. The allowable amount is calculated on either the school district's own per-pupil cost or that of the regional average, whichever is less, Vasallo said.

With Sea Isle's pre-K-8 per-pupil cost expected to be

close to the current year's, which was in the \$40,000 per child range, Vasallo is anticipating administrative costs being based on the regional average again. In the current school year, he said, Sea Isle is budgeted to the very last penny in that area. Even so, the district only made it within the state limits by spreading out the salaries, and accompanying duties, of Vasallo, Benedetto and several others who fall in the administrative job description.

Vasallo and Benedetto are employees of the Educational Information Resource Center (EIRC), the outside group hired by the school board to run the district. In the contracts with EIRC, Vasallo is the school business administrator but also takes on duties of transportation coordinator and facilities manager. Neither transportation nor facilities fall under the administrative area. Benedetto, in addition to the chief school administrator, is also the curriculum coordinator and the bulk of his salary falls under that classification. Curriculum also does not fall under administrative limits of S1701.

Preliminary budget figures are anticipated at the board meetings later this month. The Sea Isle Board of Education meets in the school library on the third and fourth Tuesdays of the month. Meetings begin at 6 p.m. and are open to the public.