

Sea Isle changes course on education Board votes to talk to O.C. about grades 5-8.

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SEA ISLE CITY - Last month the Sea Isle school board laid to rest doubts about the school remaining open, voting to keep the tiny school operational, as is, and stop discussions about closing their doors.

That lasted less than a month.

In a surprise move, a modified version of the plan to send students to Ocean City resurfaced at the school board's Tuesday workshop meeting. It did not appear on the agenda, and there had been no discussion of education alternatives since the May 22 vote.

More surprising was the source of the recommendation to pursue sending the upper grade students to Ocean City, possibly as soon as this September. During public comment in the meeting, Dr. Charles Ivory, director of EIRC (Educational Information and Resource Center), asked the board to

pass a resolution sending the solicitor and school administration to Ocean City to find out if the neighboring school district would take Sea Isle's middle school students.

"I am requesting the board considers authorizing the solicitor to draw up a resolution to allow the administrator to open discussions with Ocean City to tuition our middle school youngsters to Ocean City," Ivory told the board. "If possible beginning in September 2007, but otherwise in September 2008."

At the May 22 meeting, it was EIRC staffer Tim Wade who recommended the board vote to keep the Sea Isle school open and operational, "at status quo," for the foreseeable future.

Several board members reacted angrily Tuesday night when they found out the foreseeable future had, in EIRC's view, a shelf life of less than a month.

"Why is this coming up? We just decided to keep the kids here and not keep discussing this," board member Robert Smith shouted. "I don't know why this is even being discussed. We made that decision a month ago."

Not all board members opposed Ivory's suggestion.

Tom Szczurek, one of the voices supporting sending all students to Ocean City throughout the debate over the past several months, was surprised but supportive of Ivory's request.

"We've had our good moments and our bad ones. But I would probably like to go over and hug you right now," Szczurek told Ivory. "At least someone has finally acknowledged our students can get better, and more education at another location."

"I'm not saying they're not getting a good education here," he quickly added.

Board member Terrence Libro was less supportive.

"I think this is ridiculous," he said. "It is dredging everything back up. The vote was to keep the kids here and work on this school. We need to do that and improve the program here."

"With (law) S1701, if we get rid of more kids, there won't be enough to keep us open. For God's sake, give it a month! We just had the vote."

Ivory agreed sending the upper grades, about half of the school's 83 resident students, would cause problems with state budget regulations including law S1701, which controls administrative costs based on a per-pupil count. Sea Isle has already had to spread duties and accompanying salaries for administrators throughout the budget. Decreasing the student population could effectively cut in half the district's administrative funds.

"If we send the middle students out, it would probably cause problems with S1701, but I think we could come up with some solutions, working with the state," Ivory said. "EIRC would stick with you another year as you decide or rethink any decision you made."

Ivory told the board that before the May 22 vote, the teachers told Wade they would support the board if they decided to send the students to Ocean City.

The board never heard that

Sea Isle reconsiders

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fact, member Ellen Ramsey said, until a brief public comment from a teacher immediately before the May 22 vote. Ramsey was one of three board members who supported closing the Sea Isle City school and sending all students to Ocean City.

Sea Isle's school covers pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. High school students are sent to Ocean City High School.

According to Ivory and board solicitor John Armstrong, had Sea Isle closed its doors, Ocean City would have been legally obligated to take Sea Isle's tenured teachers. It was not clear if, in sending only some of the students, the same

obligation exists.

Ivory said the new resolution would allow the administration - EIRC - to initiate discussions with Ocean City but at the same time would not bind the school board in any way.

"The middle school youngsters need more than we are able to give them here. In getting to know the board over the past year and taking a hard look at the feasibility study, it is something you need to do," Ivory explained. "You owe it to these youngsters to discuss it. It is a way to transition the students, so they are competitive with their fellow students when they reach ninth grade at Ocean City High School."

Sea Isle wants to negotiate sending middle school students to O.C. as soon as this fall

Board member Michael McHale, who resigns next month to join city council, also voted to close the school last month. He said the district would be foolish if they refuse to discuss sending students to Ocean City.

"Look at the law. In three years, the state could force a change on us," McHale said. "We're in the power position right now to sit down with Ocean City. They need us as much as we need them."

McHale said the Sea Isle school would use its entire remaining budget surplus this year, and residents would definitely face a school related tax hike next year.

"We are going to be out of surplus and the tax increase will be at least a penny," McHale said. "We saw the budget go down, two to one, this year. Wait and see how much it goes down next year, when there is an increase. Most of the residents I've talked to want what is best for our kids, and most think that means sending them to Ocean City."

"When we voted, we voted as a board. Even if you disagreed with it, we stand behind that vote as a board," Smith said. "Don't raise doubts in other people's minds about something that is pointless, because the board already decided."

Unconvinced, Szczurek made the motion to have the solicitor prepare a formal resolution for the June 26 meeting directing the administration to open discussions with Ocean City's superintendent about sending either the fifth or sixth through eighth grade students to Ocean City. Ramsey seconded the motion.

The motion passed five votes to two, with Smith and Libro voting against it. In addition to Szczurek, Ramsey and McHale, Matt McCullum and Joe Schmidt supported the resolution.