

**Study of a Community Relations issue Statement:**

*The purpose of this reflection is to address the increased demand for school consolidation while maintaining fiscal responsibility in the Mineola Union Free District*

- a. Issue  
School closings  
Redistricting  
Financial responsibility
- b. Involvement  
Students & Families  
District Administration  
Taxpayers  
Local businesses
- c. Setting  
Mineola Union Free School District, Long Island, New York

Joyce Epstein discusses the three spheres of influence in her theoretical frameworks as approaches to effective partnerships with the student as the main focus. The three spheres include school, family and community. Beginning the academic year in September 2009, Mineola Union Free School District communicated to all three spheres they were seriously considering a change with the current district configuration for purposes of financial stability. The current Superintendent and Board of Education eventually closed two elementary schools, redistricted most students, and reassigned staff in two consecutive years. For the district, their responsibility to the tax payer was how to remain fiscally responsible for the community and district while remaining diligent in providing a challenging and least disruptive education program for all learners during this time. The following details are support for how this was achieved.

Here is a series of excerpts from the Superintendent's blog for the community to develop an understanding of the choices that lay ahead for them beginning with early conversations about the idea of reducing the local schools to more regional (north and south) schools.

Statement on School Closing posted February 2010 by Superintendent Dr. Michael Nagler

- At its February 25 Business Meeting, the Mineola Board of Education voted to close two of the district's elementary schools. A decision on which two schools will be closed has not yet been made. However, it was decided that the first school will close as of September 1, 2011 and the second school will close as of September 1, 2012. This decision was made after years of discussion, independent studies, and input from the Mineola community. Given the unprecedented financial challenges our district is currently facing, the Board's decision was necessary to continue to maximize the high quality of education our students receive, while minimizing the financial impact to our taxpayers. The Board has

authorized me to develop and execute a plan for consolidating our elementary schools, which will ultimately lead to a more equitable and cost-efficient distribution of students in the elementary grades. I look forward to working with the Community Committee on Consolidation, a group comprised of area residents, to develop a reconfiguration plan. Together, we will find the right solution that is in the best interest of our students.

Triple C Reconfiguration Report to the Board written and posted May 2010

- The community committee on consolidation presented its findings to the Board of Education this evening. Robin Bischoff and Rick Ueland represented the group in presenting a synopsis of the discussion the group has had. The proposal takes into consideration many of the points the community has voiced over the last few months. They included: “Keep younger children closer to home”, “Children should spend as many years in one building as possible”, “Equalize class size”, “Adjust the proportions of ESL and Special Education students”, “We don’t want to pay for construction”, “Don’t put 8th grade in the High School or 5th in the Middle School”. What we uncovered is that the last two points cannot be accomplished. After analyzing and discussing over a dozen different options we came to the realization that we cannot keep the eighth grade out of the HS without adding classrooms to a building. Therefore the committee recommended the following.
  - Option One- NO construction costs-
    - Pre K- Grade 2 Two buildings One on each side of Jericho Turnpike
    - Grades 3,4 Jackson Avenue
    - Grades 5, 6, 7 Middle School
    - Grades 8-12 High School
  - Option Two- requires passing a bond of approximately 7 million dollars
    - Pre K- Grade 2 Two buildings One on each side of Jericho Turnpike
    - Grades 3-5 Jackson Avenue
    - Grades 6-8 Middle School
    - Grades 9-12 High School
- Both options have pros and cons but both will deliver an exceptional learning environment and experience for children. Both options will begin with closing Willis Avenue in September 2011. I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all the members of the Triple C. They listened to one another and arrived at a compromise that is in the best interest of all children.

As evident by the issues and frameworks shared by the Superintendent and Board of Education on the Superintendent’s blog regarding these issues, the idea of redistricting and closing two schools is a significant community relations paradigm. Many of the conversations relating to this decision were held both publicly and anonymously on the blog. After several aggressive and decidedly ineffective comments were posted on the blog, the Superintendent decided to only

allow non-anonymous comments. Several of the public and anonymous comments leading to this decision are posted below regarding community members feelings about the school closings.

- I am begging this school board to vote responsibility. How can you justify keeping schools open when the buildings are not filled? Posted January 21, 2010
- Clustering grades is a horrible idea! There is NO research that shows it improves academic success. There is research however, that shows the contrary...it lowers academic success. Here is a novel idea that no one wants to talk about...How about teachers and administrators take a pay freeze or a pay cut...just like the rest of the free market economy in this country. Posted January 22, 2010
- Thank you for such a clear and concise presentation last night. I do not believe the budget has ever been presented and explained in such a way Posted January 22, 2010
- Our community was just on eyewitness news about our school closings. This should do wonders for our property values. But hey at least we get to save 25 bucks a month on our tax bill. On another note we should demand to know which schools are being considered for closure. Posted January 25, 2010
- I don't know where you are getting that figure of 25 bucks a month and by the way, no matter what the savings are, the fact that you can afford it is wonderful. However, there are plenty of people in this neighborhood who can't and the last time I checked, we live in a community where we have to consider ALL the taxpayers. Posted January 26, 2010
- I don't want this to get nasty. I read your opinion and I am voicing mine. It's terrible to see our community splitting apart. Posted January 26, 2010
- Hello, Dr. Nagler,  
I wanted to thank you for using this blog to communicate to the parents and members of the district. Posted February 3, 2010
- Thorough all these discussions, never once have I read that the unions are seriously looking to sit down and renegotiate some terms of their contracts to help this situation out. It would at least "appear" that the teachers union is willing to let 20 teachers go within 3 years and that is fine with the membership!!!! Posted February 4, 2010
- Those of you who spoke against clustering all had one common phrase "my child". This is not about your child, it is about our children as a whole. Posted February 5, 2010
- I find it somewhat offensive that community members would post rumors and insults like that in a public forum, it only leads way to more controversy, and I don't think we need any more than we already have. I don't imagine that is what Dr. Nagler had in mind when he started his Superintendent's Blog. Posted February 6, 2010

The comments posted on the Superintendents blog represent a non-random sample of many of the postings, it should be noted that successive conversations between several of the postings were more descriptive. I have posted the link here should you choose to read further.

[<http://blog.mineola.k12.ny.us/>] The comments above represent families of the many different schools in the community, teachers in the district who are also parents, tax payers who are not parents, Board members and even the Superintendent. The comments range from appreciation of the opportunity to communicate ideas to personal attacks on community members. The Superintendent has also shared that several posts were not posted or removed because he deemed them inappropriate and too insulting towards others. As 21<sup>st</sup> century technology is used and

immediate feedback and communication is made increasingly more available, opinions are abundant. Right or wrong, everybody has one and is using them more readily.

Two of five Board members in the past year placed an advertisement in a local paper to address several of their concerns the Superintendent and majority of the Board had proposed for district changes. The divisive nature of their publication was intended to dispute many of the Superintendent's presentations regarding the school closings and redistricting data. Following the publication of the *McGrath and Parrino Plan*, the Superintendent posted several comments regarding "inaccuracies and embellishments that I [Superintendent] find it hard to believe school Board members would get wrong." Below are several of the comments, posted March 2011, that highlight the miscommunication and adversarial relationship that have plagued the Board and the Superintendent relationship regarding this matter over the last several years. The italicized remarks are those posted by the Superintendent to refute what was published by the two Board members. The community at large was aware of the negative campaign against the Superintendent including having the press at more than one Board meeting regarding related issues.

- "A failed budget due to voters rejection of the Hampton Street School construction project funding within it might result in necessitating severe reductions in school district programs including pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, fine arts and sports"
  - *This year's budget will be at or close to a 2.5% levy without affecting ANY program regardless of the Hampton Project. If the budget fails we would go to a contingent budget at 1.96%. The 2 million dollars earmarked for the project would then be placed in the Capital reserve fund to be voted on at a later date. The voters DID vote to approve a reserve for reconfiguration purposes, so why wouldn't we fund it? We are trying to accelerate the project and save money on yet another vote by placing in the budget vote. The only person that has mentioned reducing PreK and Kindergarten is Mrs. Parrino.*
- "Additionally we're told that the superintendent has already personally informed 7<sup>th</sup> grade students this past week that they would be attending school at Mineola High School in the fall, upsetting those students and alienating their parents."
  - *Both board members are well aware that I left for vacation on Thursday and returned yesterday morning. I have not spoken to any student, although I plan to speak with them when we have more details of the move. To suggest that I purposely upset children and alienated parents is divisive and unwarranted*
- "Teachers have been given excess notices"
  - *No teacher has been given an excess notice. At this time I do not know who is being excessed. According to their contract they must be notified by April 1<sup>st</sup>.*
- "All of this is being done without knowing whether the voters will approve the Board's construction plan for the Hampton Street School without which the Board's default option cannot be implemented."
  - *This is untrue. If for some reason the Hampton Street project is rejected we would simply use Willis Avenue instead and close Hampton. The modifications necessary for using Willis can be handled in house at a low cost. The Board members are confusing the Willis projects. The \$1.7 million figure from the bond was to build 14 classrooms and a rooftop playground. That is NOT*

***necessary to use Willis as a PreK-2 building. If you recall we need to reconfigure 5 classrooms and add ovens to the lunchroom and repurpose part of the parking lot for a play area. All of this can be achieved with the 500,000 facilities upgrade budget that currently is still in the budget for 2011-12.***

- “we also propose, as the Roslyn School District is doing that the Board designate \$2 million from the undesignated reserve to offset the tax levy for 2011-12”
  - ***Roslyn has millions of dollars in reserve funds that they can allocate. Mineola does not. Instead of funding reserves we have diligently paid down the 10million dollar bond saving the taxpayer of 5 million in interest payments.***

As exemplified by the writings and discussions in the blog and at Board meetings, the relationship between the Superintendent and a minority of the Board was not always the most civil and beneficial for a productive learning environment.

In addition to the issues posted and shared on the blog and at Board meetings, the Superintendent has been very transparent with his endeavors to ensure all information regarding the redistricting and closings is transparent and communicated effectively. Information is shared on the district website under a special tab reserved for issues related to “School Reconfiguration.” Further, issues related to the transition plan are discussed and reviewed by District councils through committees that meet with PTA, teachers union, neighbors, town civic association, and key implementers such as architects.

Following many Board meetings, postings, community evening discussions the Board voted February 8, 2011 to close Cross Street Elementary school in 2011 and Willis Avenue Kindergarten center in 2012. When this critical decision was made it was intended to support the present grade configuration of the Middle School and High School as they currently are established. That decision did not remain and further reconfigurations were eventually made. The later modification and decision primarily relocated the movement of 5<sup>th</sup> grade to the Middle School and 8<sup>th</sup> grade to the High School. Parents at all grade levels especially those of 7<sup>th</sup> grade parents were most vocal in criticizing this decision.

To help facilitate the transition process my position as Middle Level Instructional Leader of Math Science and Technology was changed to 8<sup>th</sup> grade Instructional Leader at the High School. This title and job change was to help ease some of the anxiety of the students and family members that felt their child would not have a primary resource or person of interest to help and provide assistance during the transition. Having witnessed the transition I can clearly share that after several evening parent question and answer periods, also many postings and PTA discussions, not only did the transition occur smoothly, the building and students assimilated almost effortlessly. It was evident that the community changed their perception of the transition by the orientation for incoming 8<sup>th</sup> graders as the questions parents were asking this May 2012 were focused on curriculum and resources as opposed to May 2011 the issues were about bullying and fear of exposure to upper classman.

The following posting to the community by the Superintendent was to address a postcard mailing by an anonymous group of homeowners that were vying to prevent to redistricting by a “No” vote on the budget. The monies spent for the campaign were private and those behind the

mailing were never publicly identified. As for several inaccuracies of the issues, the Superintendent again used the tools of the blog to communicate inaccuracies. The posting below is the response to the mailing.

*If the “committee against the bond” will resurface if another bond is proposed? The rhetoric of the second postcard leads the reader to believe that the cost of the bond is the problem with the reconfiguration plan. They also attack previous bonds. To be clear the 35 million worth of bonds since 1999 was necessary because the buildings were left to deteriorate or were not made ADA compliant as required by law. Willis Avenue was built because the old Willis Avenue was condemned due to years of neglect. The monies were spent on elevators in three buildings, roofs, windows, doors, and new heating and ventilating. The HS auditorium was the only non-infrastructure item. Our buildings are now in excellent shape and will remain that way. I find it ironic that the postcard implies the bond is a waste of money, yet the configuration this bond creates is designed to save the taxpayer the most amount of money. An independent finance committee, comprised of district residents, concluded that this bond will save the taxpayer 42 million over 10 years AFTER the cost of the bond and interest is calculated. The “committee’s” argument falls very short in this postcard. If you are concerned about saving the most money then this bond does that. In fact the second bond saves the least amount of money, so I am certain the committee will return- if and when that bond is put up.*

In conclusion, the community and district had many tenuous discussions and concerns regarding the aforementioned issue. The following information is part of the many presentations developed by the Superintendent for public comment.

### The Benefits of Clustering

There are many benefits in clustering for a district our size. Of course, as with anything in life, there are cons as well. The most obvious is that many children will have to travel a greater distance for their entire school career. As you begin to formulate your decision on whether to support the October 26<sup>th</sup> bond here are some clear advantages to clustering:

- **Class size**
  - The *variance* in class size will no longer exist. When all of the students in the same grade are in one place you can equalize class size. There will no longer be some classes at 16 while others are at 22. Over the last few years the Board of Education has been steadfast in adhering to the class size guidelines and there is no indication this commitment will change going forward. In fact it makes it easier since it streamlines staffing.
- **Facilities**
  - Currently all of our buildings are not equal. Some have new Library media centers while others do not. Some have proper electricity and wiring for technologies while others don't. Clustering provides the same facility for all of the children.
  - Any work done on a specific building benefits all of the children in the district. It is not necessary to spend more money to replicate the same project in multiple places

- **Heterogeneity**
  - There is a better ratio of heterogeneity in classes where there are more students-mixing ESL and special needs students within an overall larger number of students allows for more of a balance between different needs of students. This is especially noteworthy in inclusion classes, where the proportion of disabled and non-disabled students is critical to the overall learning needs in the class
- **Professional Development**
  - Having a greater number of classes and teachers at a grade level provides more opportunity for teacher's to collaborate, share ideas and work together as a team. Students are the beneficiaries of teacher collaboration and teaming.
  - Training and collaboration for new initiatives and program is easier to implement
- **Staffing**
  - Combining schools would reduce or eliminate most or all of the shared staff and duplication of services. Shared staff imposes many challenges, not only on the staff, but on the schedule and the accessibility of the staff members and services for students. Staff travel time would be completely avoided providing for more time for instruction in the classrooms
  - Students would have better access to teachers and more supports and services. The positions that are currently shared in the smaller schools are: library, computer, music and art, ESL, reading, gifted and special education.
  - AIS, reading teachers, ESL teachers would be dedicated to a grade, thereby allowing for on-going collaboration and efficient and flexible scheduling to meet the NYS mandates and the needs of each student. Math teachers would be dedicated to each school.
- **Curriculum**
  - With more classes, teachers and students in fewer buildings, it is easier and more efficient to implement new programs and new teacher positions. For example, it took us four years to phase in the literacy collaborative and reading recovery. These are excellent, but costly programs that could have been phased in more quickly if we had fewer schools.
  - Often times the high cost of program implementation and hiring new teachers and staff in small schools are an imposition on the school district, and therefore, we aren't able to bring certain programs, services and/or positions to fruition-programs and positions the students would greatly benefit from.
  - There are differences in the specific options presented, i.e., which grades are in which buildings. Specific to the 8th grade moving to the high school there are programmatic and academic benefits-more 8th graders would be able to participate in accelerated classes. We currently offer two sections in accelerated science and two sections of accelerated math in 8th grade. These opportunities could operate more as an open enrollment option.
  - There are great benefits to creating buildings dedicated to developmentally appropriate teaching and learning. An early childhood PreK-1 building allows for a complete focus on reading development and social interaction. A Grade 2-4 building reinforces reading readiness and prepares student for state assessments. A grade 5-7 building actually extends elementary school. It allows for an

extended transition to departmentalization. Finally an 8-12 High School will allow for an extended elective program that will benefit all of the students.

- Assembly programs, parent workshops, professional development activities and resources/ materials would be specifically selected and dedicated to students at