



December 19, 2012

Dear Parents and Community Members:

This week, the North Allegheny School Board will decide whether or not to hold a hearing in January 2013 to consider my recommendation to close Peables Elementary School at the end of this current school year. Holding this hearing would be the first step in a legal process that would allow three months for the resolution and final determination of this question. I sincerely hope they choose to proceed with this important step.

The North Allegheny School District has been studying the issue of how many elementary schools are needed to provide a high quality education to the children in our community for more than 15 years. The issue involves several complex questions:

- (1) How do you define and measure a high quality education?
- (2) How do you determine how many children will live in your community in the near future?
- (3) If you think you might have excess elementary capacity, how do you decide which school to close?

I believe we are at a point in time that calls for a decision on this question of elementary school capacity. It would not be prudent to avoid the opportunity to take advantage of efficiencies within our District. I am confident that we have provided excellent, comprehensive responses to every question embedded in this issue. Those responses are reinforced with research, data, and real life experience.

I want to summarize those key responses one more time. But, before I do, there is one point to emphasize. **Fifteen years of study has cost the North Allegheny School District both time and money.** These costs have resulted not just from the expense of research and reporting, but time has shown us we have been operating our elementary schools with empty classrooms, empty seats, and room to spare. This has cost us as well.

I agree that closing a school is a big step and proceeding cautiously with a conservative mindset is advisable. However, the landscape of public education has changed in many ways. Funding formulas have changed, revenue resources have been redefined, and operational efficiency must be maximized if any school district is going to be able to protect the quality of its core business – which is delivering an excellent educational program. **The need for maximum operational efficiency makes bringing this question of closing an elementary school to the table in January 2013 the right thing to do.**

Defining and Measuring a High Quality Education

There is not enough time or space in this one document to review the educational accomplishments of this School District and our students over the past sixty years. NASD Strategic Plans dating back to 2001 included the goal of becoming one of the ‘Top 100 School Districts in the Nation.’ This was the inspiration and foundation for many of the decisions and much of the work that was done here for more

than a decade. The successful efforts of principals, teachers, staff members and students to respond to that goal are evident in every aspect of the District. **North Allegheny lives, breathes, knows and is ‘high quality’ when it comes to providing educational experiences to children.** Test scores of every kind, competitions, awards, program recognitions, college acceptance ratios, and parent and student support indicators all provide confirmation of that fact.

During that same decade or more, we have to note that **NASD class size guidelines were the same as they are today and the same as those being proposed by the new design model that would be in place, if Peebles Elementary School were to be closed.** NASD class size guidelines are K-2nd grades : 25 and 3rd-5th grades : 30. The District has consistently achieved these outstanding academic accomplishments implementing these guidelines and we will continue to do so.

There have been some questions raised in the community about how to understand the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) unit capacity of 25 for all classrooms greater than 660 square feet and what that number of 25 is used for in the scope of school district operations.

PDE Unit Capacity

The PDE helps school districts fund the construction of schools. In order to establish the level of funding a district will receive for a building, the PDE considers these factors:

- What is the maximum projected enrollment? (present enrollment of the district + 10%)
- How many general purpose classrooms greater than 660 square feet are included in the design?

The PDE funding formula for elementary schools reimburses all districts across the state allowing for 25 students per classroom for 660 square feet of classroom space or larger, based upon the maximum projected enrollment – regardless of building or program design, community demographics, or other factors.

This calculation and funding commitment does not place any requirements on a school district in terms of future occupancy or operational management of a building. The PDE understands that enrollments vary and operational efficiency is the concern of the school district. The PDE expects that it is the responsibility of the School Board in conjunction with the Administration to set appropriate class size guidelines for the delivery of the educational program in each school district.

It has been suggested that the PDE unit capacity appears in the Pennsylvania Education Code in Chapter 55 section 13 as a legal mandate for public schools relative to teaching load/class size. This is not true. The section cited is neither relevant nor applicable to public schools. It is located in Part II of the PA Code, which is only applicable to Private Academic Schools. **There is no mandated class size for public schools in any grade level.**

Fewer Schools Means More Students per School, NOT More Students per Classroom

Closing Peebles Elementary School would require redistricting and result in filling of some of the classrooms/seats that are currently empty in the remaining schools. This is referred to as a higher operational efficiency, which would also be a cost savings to the District on several levels. It would also result in a smoothing out of the distribution of students across grade levels. The Administration provided a detailed demonstration at the November 28, 2012, Board meeting which showed how this may improve class sizes, in some cases.

It is the objective of the Administration to increase enrollment at the remaining schools. It is NOT the objective or the intent to increase class size. We anticipate that some of the very few unique situations we have experienced this year with high class size numbers may be resolved by a redistricting.

It is important to note there are approximately 145 elementary class sections total across the District. This year there are eight total sections at 30 students or above. Three of those have 30 students; four have 31 students; and one has 32 students. These sections are spread across the seven elementary schools. By redistricting, more students would be assigned to grade levels where class sizes are in the higher ranges, but additional sections were not able to be justified in this or perhaps another year. Adding an additional section at that level would reduce the class size for all sections.

Redistricting would also result in the use of some of the “extra classrooms” in each of the schools that would remain open. Right now, the Administration can verify that there are 33 “spare” classroom spaces among all of our elementary schools. District records document that all of the six schools that would remain open after the closure of Peebles have functioned in the past, when District enrollment numbers were higher, in the design model that is being recommended. The suggestion that the available “spares” are not appropriate for use as classrooms is not valid. These spaces are being used in a variety of other ways this school year, primarily because the space is available and educators are both flexible and creative. However, this is not the most efficient use of our buildings – and not the way in which they were designed to be used.

A Look at Enrollment Projections

The business of planning ahead is an important and routine part of school district management. North Allegheny has not become and remained the outstanding School District it is without being consistently good at all aspects of school district administration. Through the course of the presentations this fall, the Administration has shown a compilation of historical data that reinforces the recommendation to move forward with a hearing on the closure of Peebles Elementary School.

Multiple expert sources have presented NA enrollment forecasts that do not anticipate growth. All of these reports conclude that – at best – we are looking at stable enrollment over the next decade or more, but more probably a slow decline in enrollment. I would like to pull some key information items out of this important general conclusion:

- The recommendation to close Peebles Elementary School has been based upon a conservative design model that uses stable enrollment numbers, not declining enrollment numbers.
- The overall population in the NASD community has increased for the last 50 years and is projected to continue increasing for the next 30 years. Despite increased overall population every year, NA student population peaked in 1997 and has been stable for the past 15 years. **Overall population numbers do NOT predict school enrollment.**
- **Between 2001 and 2012, NA enrollment at the elementary level has grown by 60 total students across six grade levels and seven schools.** Although we clearly understand that enrollment does not “average out” in real life application, to understand this statistic, consider that 60 students across seven schools is less than 10 students per school and 1.5 students per grade level.

- School enrollment projections are made using a standard industry technique called “cohort survival analysis,” which is dependent upon “live birth” statistics. In our community from 1989 – 2003, there were an average of over 500 live births per year. **Since 2004, there have been less than 450 average live births per year in our District. Simply stated, less live births correlates to lower school enrollment.** There are other considerations, but this one general statistic illustrates the results of the much more detailed studies which have been done to demonstrate that residents in our municipalities are in fact “aging in place.”

The SPC/2010 Census information also points to this phenomenon. For example, a comparison of 2000 to 2010 census data shows a decrease in the total number of people in every age category in Town of McCandless up to age 54. Beginning at age 55, we see large increases in population in McCandless. **This is additional evidence of “aging in place.”**

It is further emphasized by looking at the profile of households reflected in the Census. McCandless has 26.51% of its total households with individuals under age 18 compared to Franklin Park – a growth area – having 42.44%. Since McCandless has the largest overall population of all of NA’s communities, we can see the influence of these changes on the whole District.

- At this point in time, the School Board has been presented with a number of reports. They have been generated by various professionals using similar techniques and a wide variety of data sources. We have dug deeply. We have reached out to the best of the best in the region. We have monitored the trends consistently and with fidelity for 15 years. The bottom-line conclusion continues to be the same. **All indications are that enrollment will be stable at best, but most probably trend slowly downward in the next ten years.**
 - Enrollment projections are fluid trend analyses. The objective of creating enrollment projections is not similar to that of a dart game or playing the lottery – we are not aiming for a single, static number. **The process is continuous and the objective is to identify a developing growth curve.**
 - That said, NA has a good understanding of the process we use in our enrollment projections. **We know how the formula works, what influences it, and the importance of annually refreshing the data.** A trend which occurs in years when more children are born than can be tracked to enrollment in kindergarten or first grade is known as the ‘negative birth to K retention rate.’ NA has experienced this trend in 7 out of 13 years over the past 15 years. This trend negatively affects the numerical target of enrollment analysis, but not the trend analysis overall. This is because the data is corrected by an annual report refresh that pushes those numbers through the system. These kinds of in-depth explanations are important for the Administration to be aware of and compensating for on a continuing basis. This is expertise.
- Experienced professionals include risk management options in their planning. **This Administration has outlined six options for implementation in the event that some unforeseen scenario would develop following the closure of Peebles Elementary School.** These are all operationally feasible, adaptive, educationally sound, and accessible at a lower cost than that of operating an extra small school.

Why Peebles?

The District has seven elementary schools to consider for closure, but there is only sufficient capacity to close a small elementary school, of which we have five: Bradford Woods, Franklin, Hosack, Ingomar, and Peebles. The first criteria for closure is location in McCandless, since the enrollment projections for McCandless are the lowest of all four municipalities. That criteria eliminates Bradford Woods and Franklin.

Among the three remaining, it is logical to eliminate Ingomar Elementary due to its proximity to McKnight and Franklin, which eases the implementation of potential redistricting scenarios. Peebles and Hosack remain.

Peebles was selected for the following reasons:

- It is the only small building with no spare classroom.
- Its campus presents entrance/egress difficulties for school buses and large group activities.
- The design of the building is suitable for potential leasing without additional build-out (as opposed to Hosack which has an open classroom design).
- Hosack has newer construction.
- The Hosack campus has an adjacent parcel of land of approximately 11 acres which was donated to the District by the Department of Defense. This land is eligible for school-based development that would be available for community use as well, but it cannot be sold.
- With only one mile separating Peebles from Hosack, they are both neighborhood schools for southern McCandless.

Thoughts on Community-Based Opposition to this Recommendation

It is to be expected that some community members who love Peebles Elementary School would oppose this recommendation. NA has faced this kind of crossroads in the past, as have many other school districts in our area and around the country. Our neighbor, the North Hills School District, closed three elementary schools in 2009 and 2010. The Pittsburgh Public School District has closed a number of schools over the past several years. NA closed Espe Elementary School in 1999.

I feel it is my responsibility to share a few additional things related to this important decision:

- (1) **Community residents certainly have the right as individuals to disagree** with the results of the work or the recommendations presented by professionals who speak at our meetings. However, the fact that someone disagrees with the results and recommendations does not mean that the work is incorrect or that the data is not robust. It should not be suggested or implied that these individuals are not experts in their fields or that their work is incorrect or incomplete or otherwise flawed. The North Allegheny School District seeks out individuals whose reputations are well established in this community and region to counsel and assist us.

Just because some of our constituents don't like the data, doesn't mean it is wrong. In the case of this particular fifteen-year Demographic & Feasibility Study, all these many reports and experts have come to the same conclusion. We feel confident at this point in moving forward on the basis of that information.

- (2) Suggestions about looking at other ways in which the District can and should “save money” are all valuable. Many of them have been, are being, and will be studied. This has to happen. **The focus of the Administration and the School Board is on the bigger picture of the School District and what is best for all schools, all students, and the shared future for this community.** Closing a small elementary school is just one piece of a much larger puzzle.

In particular, there has been an ongoing suggestion relative to the “trade-off” of school closure vs. outsourcing transportation or additional cuts in transportation expenses, such as not purchasing buses for 2013 - 2014. This is an “apples and oranges” discussion. The District budget for 2012-2013 is \$126M. This includes a wide range of expenses essential to the operation of a School District. The provision of safe transportation of students to and from school is one of them. A May 2011 study of transportation costs is currently being updated and reviewed.

- (3) The timeline proposed for holding a hearing on the closure of Peebles Elementary School has been carefully considered in light of other deadlines and schedules. **The dates presented to the School Board were established based upon the Administration’s desire to prepare a quality redistricting plan and implement a successful transition plan for all students, if the Board approves the closure.** While nothing is assumed, experience tells us all that will be necessary in the event that the Board chooses to move forward with the recommendation. As with every aspect of this project, it is our desire to put what is best for our students and their future before every other consideration.
- (4) The Administration feels confident that all our elementary children will receive a quality educational experience that enables them to achieve to their highest potential as students of North Allegheny when and if this six-school model is implemented.

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Many of the families who live in our District relate to NA’s focus on operational efficiency, as well as the numerous other actions we have been forced to take to balance our budget over the past several years. These residents have also experienced reorganization, downsizing, the closure of facilities, departmental budget cuts, and wage freezes in the workplace. They understand the impact those decisions have had and will continue to have here in our School District because they are living with them where they work as well.

NA must continue to strive to be an excellent School District. To be successful, we must protect and continue to enhance our educational programs. **I look to this community for continued support as we work together to provide all the children we serve with every educational opportunity and advantage.**

Sincerely,

Raymond D. Gualtieri, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools