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EDUCATION

Firm: Close Thayer, Parmenter schools

Report suggests creating district-wide middle school

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Published 4:38 p.m. ET Nov. 2, 2020

FRANKLIN — An architecture firm hired by Franklin Public School officials to evaluate closing Davis Thayer Elementary School last year recently came back to them with data indicating that they should also think about closing another school, too.

Or merging two schools to create a district-wide middle school.

Architect Craig Olsen from Kaestle Boos Associates presented a comprehensive facilities analysis report to the Franklin School Committee on Oct. 27, reviewing the viability of closing Davis Thayer Elementary.

If no changes are made to any of the schools, Olsen said all of them will continue to operate under capacity, will be financially burdened by costs to maintain those underutilized facilities and would suffer "reduced educational adequacy in schools built prior to 1996."

The top two options

The average age of the district's seven buildings is around 30 years, said Olsen, clarifying that number is swayed by the age of Davis Thayer — 96 years old. Gerald M. Parmenter Elementary School is 69 years old. The average expected lifespan of a school is around 50 years old, he said.

By measuring aspects such as physical features, environment and media access for all the district schools, Olsen said an education adequacy score was calculated, which measures how a school "support(s) modern 21st century learning environments and deliver(s) the desired educational program," according to the report.

"Davis Thayer, Kennedy and Parmenter are your lowest-performing schools from an educational adequacy standpoint," he said, clarifying to the committee that it wasn't an

indicator of a good education not being offered, but rather that they scored the lowest of the schools based on data gathered to calculate the score.

Franklin school board votes to study shuttering Davis Thayer School

The simplest and best solution would be to close Davis Thayer and Parmenter and redistribute the students within their same district, he said.

Parmenter students would transfer to Jefferson Elementary School and Davis Thayer students would head to Helen Keller Elementary. The option would still leave John F. Kennedy Elementary as the last remaining, stand-alone elementary school, he said, but would be addressed as a 10-year need. That option would also improve the schools' utilization rates, reduce how much maintenance needs to be done and would allow them to consolidate staff, he said.

“This is a solution that can be explored more further, purely from a data standpoint,” he said.

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However, Olsen said this solution only addresses the immediate - not long-term - need. But merging two schools - Oak Street Elementary into Horace Mann Middle School - to create a district-wide middle school might, he said. There was no mention of the fate of the district's two other middle schools: Rimington and Annie Sullivan.

From a 10-year need, he said Horace Mann Middle School is “the ideal school,” citing its larger gymnasium and auditorium, the potential to collaborate with the high school located at the same site and could allow the district to form smaller learning communities.

Davis Thayer, Kennedy and Parmenter elementary schools would be kept as is, however, this can't be considered a viable option without first creating a long-term master plan, he said.

There were three other options Olsen reviewed, including:

Just closing Davis Thayer Elementary – Students from Davis Thayer would move to Helen Keller Elementary. However, at that point, the school would be considered over-utilized, said Olsen. But if Anne Sullivan Middle School is factored in, it would be less

over-utilized. Still, this option doesn't address all the other capacity issues throughout district, he said.

Closing Davis Thayer, Parmenter and Kennedy elementary schools – This would cause Helen Keller, Jefferson and Oak Street's utilization rates to be "bursting at the seams," he said. And it wouldn't address how the middle schools are also operating under capacity. Therefore, this option is not viable, he said.

Closing Davis Thayer and Kennedy elementary schools – Davis Thayer students would transfer to Helen Keller and Kennedy students would go to Oak Street, he said. However, Oak Street would go over capacity, and Horace Mann wouldn't be able to absorb that, he said. Therefore, this option is not feasible nor viable, he said.

Is renovating Davis Thayer an option?

It could be – as a temporary Band-Aid, but not as a long-term solution, explained Olsen. Of all the above choices, he said the board should consider this option the least.

"Right now the school's kind of broken and disconnected, like a bunch of puzzle pieces with the way it's laid out with the floors and stairs," he said. "If there was a way to connect that all to a central core element, that would be your best scenario."

In 2013, Olsen's same architectural firm presented a report to renovate Davis Thayer to the School Committee, estimating it to cost around \$23 million and pricing the cost of building a new school at \$28 million.

According to the plan then, the firm noted that most of the school's bathrooms, corridors, stairs and doorways were not handicap-accessible, and inside, there were many mechanical and plumbing issues.

Davis Thayer renovation plan presented in Franklin

The firm was contacted by the school district late last year to conduct this current report, said Olsen, and clarified to the board that, "this isn't a decision-making tool, it's just a tool to help you make a decision."

Olsen said the plan was based on data, and not financial or budgeting planning. Factors considered in the report included the age and design of buildings; capacity and utilization data; decreased enrollment across the district and economic efficiency, according to the report.

Committee Chair Dr. Anne Bergen said the next phase of the process involves looking at possible alternative uses for Davis Thayer. There is no set timeline for the process, but it is still in Phase 1. A community information meeting reviewing the report will be held via Zoom on Wednesday at 7 p.m. A link to the meeting is on the agenda for the meeting on the School Committee's website.

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