

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 25, 2021

SCRANTON SCHOOL BOARD STATEMENT ON BUILDING RECONFIGURATION PLAN

This week many Scranton School Board Directors had the opportunity to tour the George Bancroft Elementary School building, accompanied by district administrators, third-party experts and state officials. They were able to see for themselves the condition of the building and observe the issues that made it necessary to leave the building unoccupied for the remainder of this school year.

Directors also visited ITE in order to see firsthand the preparations made to accommodate our Bancroft staff and students. They were pleased to see how Principals Nora Phillips and Mario Emiliani have worked together to make the transition as seamless as possible and to see how the Bancroft community will have full access to the resources of ITE. Provisions are in place to maintain social distancing and other COVID protocols in a hybrid model. Desks are spaced appropriately, hallways are marked for traffic flow and cafeteria seating is clearly identified. Large classrooms offer the opportunity to implement CDC guidelines, even when used by two teachers.

We know that this transition will be a challenge, but we also know that Bancroft students and staff will be made welcome when they move to ITE. They will be with their familiar teachers and friends, but we hope they will also meet new friends and enjoy the amenities of this modern educational environment. Additionally, Mrs. Phillips and Mr. Emiliani have made arrangements for Bancroft families who wish to visit their students' new school.

The Board will also review the accommodations being made for our 5th grade Whittier Elementary students at South Scranton Intermediate School, before they return to their classrooms on April 12th.

As the Board of Education prepares to consider the permanent closure of George Bancroft Elementary at the meeting on April 12th, a great deal of information has been compiled. From this research, the Board has prepared a list of Frequently Asked Questions and responses, which is attached in both English and Spanish. Decisions of this magnitude require a great deal of careful thought, which all parties will continue to give to this matter.

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FACILITIES RECONFIGURATION PROPOSAL: CLOSURE OF GEORGE BANCROFT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BUILDING

A goal of the District and the Recovery Plan is to “(e)quitably allocate classrooms to provide all students with healthy, safe, and educationally appropriate learning spaces” (*PFM Report on Facilities, 2018*).

Transferring students from George Bancroft Elementary to Isaac Tripp Elementary allows more children to benefit from the modern, appropriate facilities at ITE, where there is sufficient space and unused capacity to accommodate the entire school as a cohort. No matter how much money were to be invested in the Bancroft Building, it would never be possible to create a facility suitable for 21st Century education similar to the amenities at ITE.

Why is it necessary to close any school in the Scranton School District?

The Recovery Plan details the need for the District to consolidate facilities, and close some buildings. The District has capital needs far in excess of our ability to pay for them. There is 28% excess capacity across our buildings, and declining enrollment points to this trend continuing. Capital, operating and maintenance costs are higher for older buildings, and no amount of investment can turn a 19th or early 20th century building into a modern facility capable of meeting the demands of 21st century education.

Why close the George Bancroft Building?

Facility reviews by The Palumbo Group in 2012 and Public Financial Management (PFM) in 2018 identified significant issues with the building and detailed the difficulties of bringing it up to a suitable standard. Its enrollment is under capacity at 74%, and enrollment numbers have fallen 19% since 2012. There are also high rates of student turnover. Moving the student body to Isaac Tripp Elementary in its entirety avoids splitting the community and dividing staff and students across several schools

How many students at Bancroft are affected?

223 students will move to ITE for the 4th quarter of 2020-21.

What are the specific problems with the Bancroft building?

The site is small, on a narrow street which requires stringent traffic control, and the playground facilities are poor. There is limited parking. There have been ongoing problems with the heating system, the technology is outdated, the cafeteria is inadequate with outdated equipment and the mechanical ventilation system needs replacing and does not meet CDC, DOH or ASHRAE guidelines for COVID safety. It is also not ADA compliant.

Is it true there is an open sewage pit in the basement?

The pit has now been capped off and sealed. There is a closed holding tank for grey water, not sewage, which is below the level of the city sewage line. This necessitates periodic pumping. At times the stagnant water gives off an unpleasant odor, similar to sewage, which previously escaped into the basement area due to an uncapped vent. Plumbing in the building is original, including the bathrooms. It is likely that an engineering assessment would recommend updating of the system, a major capital expense.

What would be the estimated costs of remediating Bancroft, if so decided?

It is impossible to accurately assess this at this time, in the absence of a full engineering study by the District's engineers, Greenman-Pedersen, Inc. (GPI), which could cost upwards of \$50,000. Known costs are a minimum of \$1.9 million in capital costs identified by Palumbo in 2012, which will need to be adjusted for inflation. Replacement of the ventilation system and rewiring of the building to accommodate new equipment could approach three quarters of a million dollars. The cost of rectifying additional problems discovered by the engineering study are impossible to quantify, but given the age of the structure and issues discovered in similar buildings, these are likely to run into several million dollars. Also, if any major structural works are undertaken, the building would lose the immunity grandfathered in and would have to be made ADA compliant.

Why can't ESSER funds be used at Bancroft?

The District has received funds under Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) I and II, and will receive ESSER III funds as part of the American Rescue Plan. Replacement of the ventilation system at Bancroft would be an allowable expenditure under ESSER guidelines. However, many other essential expenditures to allow for reoccupation of the building would not be eligible for this source of funding and would need to be funded from the District's general or capital funds. The uses of ESSER funds are strictly regulated. They are a one time infusion of funds and need to be used wisely for both facility and academic improvements throughout the District, including for compulsory learning loss programs, curricula updates and other COVID related support.

What will be the savings realized by closing the Bancroft building?

The District will save money by non-expenditure of Capital funds, and on operating costs. Consolidating students into one school will allow additional savings. It is impossible to give an accurate dollar figure.

Isn't it unfair to break up the Bancroft community?

Community and educational disruption will be minimized by moving all students to ITE at the same time and keeping them with their familiar teachers and their friends.

Why move the students from Bancroft to ITE so quickly?

It is not possible to return students to a building in which the mechanical ventilation system does not meet CDC, ASHRAE or DOH guidelines. It could take up to 12 months to safely remove and install a suitable replacement system.

Why would it take 12 months to make Bancroft COVID-safe for student return, if so decided?

Expending ESSER funds requires compliance with stringent regulations and bidding processes. Even with immediate commission of the necessary engineering report, it may not be ready before July. Preparation of the scope of works, an RFP, and the approval of the successful bid would take many months. Even if work commenced immediately, it would be at least a two-month process. Were the decision made to proceed with replacing the system, it is unlikely that work would be completed until 2022, and that would be dependent on there being no delays caused by other essential preliminary works, no difficulties in equipment procurement and no bad weather factors. Bancroft students would be displaced from their building for approximately two years since the mandated closure in March 2020, and would suffer further disruption on their eventual return to the school.

How far from Bancroft to ITE? How will students be transported?

It is 1.6 miles. For the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year, students will come to Bancroft as usual in the morning and be bussed to ITE under supervision. In the afternoon, they will be bussed back to Bancroft.

Are there additional transportation costs for shuttle bus transportation from Bancroft to ITE?

The District contracts busses by the day. There will be no additional cost for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year, as the busses taking students to and from Bancroft will be doing additional or second runs, which are included under our contract.

What are the demographics of the Bancroft students? ITE students?

Students at Bancroft are:

Asian: 5.1%, Black: 12.4%, Hispanic: 53.8%, Multiracial: 7.7%, White: 20.9%.

Students at ITE are:

Asian: 2.7%, Black: 14.6%, Hispanic: 36.6%, Multiracial: 4.7%, White: 40.4%.

What are the low income counts of the students?

The low income count at Bancroft is 85.0%, and at ITE it is 69.6%.

Why move Bancroft students to ITE?

Bancroft students will be together at ITE, rather than being split among several schools. There is room at ITE, and the facilities are excellent. There is a gymnasium, and a large cafeteria. The technology is modern, and the HVAC system exceeds all requirements to be COVID safe and there are safely opening windows throughout. There is ample parking, and excellent playground facilities.

Is there room at ITE?

The enrollment capacity at ITE is 1000. Current enrollment is 622 students, down 23% from 2012.

What if enrollment increases and Tripp becomes overcrowded?

At present, ITE is at 62% capacity. Moving 223 Bancroft students there will increase capacity to 84% for the 4th quarter or 2020-21. When school returns in September for 2021-22, 20 of the current 21 PreK4 students will return to their home schools, and the current 27 Bancroft 4th grade students will move to NEIS, reducing capacity to 80%. It is planned to move 5th grade students from ITE to WSIS in 2022-23, and this will further reduce capacity to 69% on an ongoing basis. These numbers may change due to fluctuating enrollments, but within two years the building will be operating at approximately the same capacity as 2019-2020.

What estimated number of and percentage of students will participate in Hybrid?

A recent survey indicates that between 25% and 30% of students from Bancroft and ITE will remain virtual until the end of this academic year. Hybrid reduces the number of students within the school by 50%. Based on these figures, about 240 ITE students and 85 Bancroft students will be within the building on any given Hybrid day. This means occupancy would be at approximately 32% of capacity.

Will there be an increase in class sizes?

There will be no changes to class size or composition for Bancroft students moving to ITE. They will be with their teachers and friends, just in a different location.

How many people will lose their jobs?

All staffing changes to be negotiated in accordance with Act 93, SFT and SEIU 32BJ contracts.

What will happen to the building?

If the Board votes to close the school permanently on April 12, it will eventually be sold, although no timeline has as yet been determined.

Why not close the Administration Building instead? Or another school?

The Recovery Plan identifies the need for a District wide reduction in facilities, and it will be necessary to determine changes to and closures of other buildings in the future. Serious ventilation issues at the Administration Building are being handled by reducing occupancy, and keeping windows open. There are no plans to undertake any work at the Administration building until its long-term future is determined.

Does the District plan to build a new elementary school?

The District constantly assesses its facilities for current and future requirements. At this time there are no plans for any new facility but it is important that the Board and the Administration consider the needs of tomorrow as well as today.

Why can't the Board amend the Recovery Plan?

The Chief Recovery Officer has the sole authority to propose amendments to the Recovery Plan adopted by the Board in August 2019. The Board can vote to accept or reject them, in full knowledge that non-compliance with the Recovery plan could result in the District being put into receivership. The Board is able to suggest and discuss possible changes with the CRO, but does not have the authority to impose them.

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