

Hamlet, North Carolina
May 29, 2024

The Richmond County Board of Education met for a Facility Study work session on May 29, 2024, at 5:00 p.m. The meeting was held at the Central Office in Hamlet, North Carolina.

The members present: Wiley Mabe, Chairman, Bobbie Sue Ormsby, Vice-Chairman, Scotty Baldwin, Jerry Ethridge, Cory Satterfield, and Daryl Mason. Ronald Tillman joined the meeting on zoom.

The administrators present: Dr. Joe Ferrell, Superintendent, Dr. Julian Carter, Associate Superintendent of Human Resources, Dr. Kate Smith, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Melvin Ingram, Assistant Superintendent of School Safety and Operations, Dr. Tesha Isler, Executive Director of School Administration and Policy, Dawn Jordan, Executive Director of Finance, Steven King, Director of Maintenance, Mike Williams, Director of Technology Systems and Student Information, Katherine Bendell, Director of Instructional Technology, and Cameron Whitley, Executive Director of Communications.

The meeting was a facility study presentation by Dr. Jim Watson for the Richmond County Schools' district. The following is an outline of key points presented.

Overview of Visits and Activities:

- Visited each school, interviewed principals, and toured campuses
- Conversations with Dr. Joe Ferrell and Steven King
- Multiple visits to some schools
- Assessment of gym bleachers at Richmond Senior High School and playgrounds at all elementary schools

Context and Trends:

- Facility studies consider capacity and trends
- ADM trends over the last ten years show a consistent decline
- Current ADM slightly under 7000 students, down from over 8000 ten years prior
- Projections show a continuous gradual decline in student numbers

Economic Development and School Quality:

- Quality public schools are essential for economic prosperity and workforce development
- Good schools attract businesses and economic investments

Enrollment and Capacity:

- First month enrollment for the current school year is 6382
- Pre-K program includes 167 students not reflected in the ADM count
- Theoretical capacity is 7765 seats, realistically around 7200
- 1.2 million square feet of heated floor space across school buildings
- Half (47.6%) of the school buildings are 50 years or older

Facilities and Aging Infrastructure:

- Older buildings are a significant portion of the school infrastructure
- Recruitment and retention of teachers are affected by the quality of facilities
- Millennials, as current and future teachers, have different expectations for school facilities

Recent and Ongoing Construction:

- Recent projects include additions and new constructions between 2007-2011
- Ongoing projects include Richmond Senior High, Mineral Springs Elementary, and Fairview Heights, with a combined cost of nearly \$21 million

Cost Considerations:

- Construction costs have been rising over the years
- Delaying projects often results in higher costs due to inflation and rising material costs
- Example: A school built in 2003 for \$13.2 million would cost \$43.2 million today

Bleacher Assessment:

- Bleachers are over 25 years old with motor issues
- Lower bleachers are in better condition than upper ones
- Estimated cost to replace all bleachers: \$750,000
- Consideration for changing the layout to improve access and functionality

Playground Safety and Assessment:

- Elementary playgrounds inspected for safety
- Significant differences in playground needs across schools
- Total cost to address recommendations: \$400,000.00

Middle School Facilities and Enrollment:

- Four middle schools with varying enrollment sizes
- Total middle school enrollment: 1459 (down from 1636 five years ago)
- Many buildings constructed between 1940 and 1957, aging between 67-75 years
- Challenges with ADA compliance and outdated facilities

Options for Middle School Consolidation:

- Close Ellerbe Middle School due to declining enrollment and redistribute students
- Consider closing two middle schools and constructing a new one
- Explore expanding current facilities to accommodate redistribution

Financial Considerations and Grants:

- Evaluations needed for cost savings in transportation, food service, and utilities
- Potential for significant savings from closing older schools and reducing maintenance costs
- Availability of North Carolina Needs Based Capital Outlay grant for school construction, especially for Tier 1 counties like Richmond

9th Grade Academy Repurposing:

- Decision made to move 9th grade back to the high school for 2025-26
- Potential repurposing of the 9th-grade academy building into a countywide Pre-K center
- Campus includes 81,000 square foot building and twenty-five acres

Pre-K Enrollment Goals and Centralization

- **Goal:** Serve 75% of eligible Pre-K students
- **Current Status:** Serving 167 Pre-K students in Richmond County
- **Projections:** Expectation to serve 250+ Pre-K students at a centralized facility

Elementary Schools Overview

- **Current Schools:** Seven elementary schools with ADM (Average Daily Membership) ranging from 287 to 475 students
- **Enrollment Trend:** Slight decline (2.9%) over the past five years
- **Projections:** Continued gradual decline of 2-3% over the next 5-10 years
- **School Ages:** Older buildings date back to 1950-1953, newer constructions in 2009 and 1989
- **Maintenance:** Older buildings likely to have increasing maintenance costs

Considerations for School Reorganization

- **Repurposing Facilities:**
 - **9th Grade Academy:** Consider converting this 81,000 square foot, relatively new (built in 2000, gym added in 2008) building for other uses like an elementary school or a Pre-K center.
- **Efficiency and Cost Savings:**
 - **Consolidation:** Closing some of the older schools could promote efficiency and reduce costs in transportation, food service, staffing, and utilities.
 - **New Construction:** Building new schools to replace older ones could be more cost-effective in the long term.

Financial and Logistical Aspects

- **Needs-Based Grants:**
 - Available for replacing old facilities, with a preference for shovel-ready projects.
 - Richmond County, being a Tier 1 county, qualifies for these grants with no local match required.
 - Potential funding varies annually, between \$284 million to \$400 million.
- **Strategic Decisions:**
 - Consider closing one or more older schools and either moving students to newer facilities or constructing new schools.
 - Evaluate the impact on maintenance costs, capacity, and overall savings.

Future Planning and Decisions

- **Challenges:** Declining enrollment, aging facilities, and financial constraints.
- **Options:**
 - Repurpose existing facilities like the 9th Grade Academy.
 - Close older schools and consolidate students in fewer, newer buildings.
 - Apply for grants to fund new construction or major renovations.
- **Long-term Vision:** Ensure facilities are modern and cost-effective, supporting education for the next 50 years.

There being no further business, the Facility Study work session ended at 6:06 p.m.