



Elementary Restructuring Q&A

1. Why is the district changing the current elementary school structure?

Answer: The current structure was based primarily on financial reasons in 2015, but now, with a stronger financial position, growing enrollment, and new housing developments, the district needed to review its model. We also needed to address issues like long bus rides, frequent student transitions between schools, and the growing need for more classroom space. It is important to ensure the structure of our elementary schools supports students academically, socially, and developmentally while preparing for current and future growth.

Note: There are only two school systems in the State of Georgia, out of 219, structured like our current model.

2. What is the current structure and what will be the new structure?

Current:

Big A Elementary = PreK and Kindergarten

Liberty Elementary = 1st and 2nd Grades

Toccoa Elementary = 3rd and 4th Grades

Stephens County 5th Grade Academy – Housed in the SCMS

SC Middle School = 6-8 Grades

SC High School = 9-12 Grades

New:

Eastanollee Elementary = PreK – 5th Grade

Big A Elementary = PreK – 5th Grade

Liberty Elementary = PreK- 5th Grade

Toccoa Elementary = PreK – 5th Grade

SC Middle School = 6-8 Grade

SC High School = 9-12 Grade

3. What public input did the district receive before making the decision to restructure the elementary schools?

Answer: We surveyed all faculty, staff, school governance team members, and parents/guardians in Stephens County Schools. Following the presentation and public comments at the October 15, 2024, BOE meeting, thirty comments were received through the online feedback form.

Online Form: 80% in favor 20% leave as is.

Employee Survey: 70.2% in favor 29.8% leave as is.

Parent Survey: 75% in favor 25% leave as is.

School Governance Teams: 83% in favor 17% leave as is.

The feedback played a critical role in shaping the Board's final decision.

4. How will restructuring benefit students?

Answer: A more traditional PreK-5 structure would reduce the number of transitions students experience, providing more stability and continuity. This can improve academic outcomes, foster stronger peer and teacher relationships, and create a more supportive environment for at-risk students. Additionally, it will allow the School System to better meet the needs of advanced learners and students with IEPs or other specialized support services. Our guiding question in all decisions is "What is best for students?"

5. What impact will this restructuring have on teachers and staff?

Answer: Teaching positions will be based on student enrollment, and all current elementary and Stephens County 5th Grade Academy staff will have the opportunity to indicate their preferences for grade levels and schools. We will do our best to accommodate these preferences.

Additionally, restructuring may help reduce teacher burnout by allowing teachers to change grade levels within their home schools.

Teachers, who will be relocating to other school buildings, will be offered the support and resources needed for moving all the furniture and setting up new classrooms.

The additional staffing that may be needed includes activity teachers and custodians.

Employees of the school system will be able to choose which school their own children will attend as long as they can provide transportation to that school.

6. How will the district manage the growing student population?

Answer: Three of our five elementary buildings currently have no available classrooms, so restructuring and reopening Eastanollee Elementary will provide additional space. The new school will add 35+ classrooms and 600 seats for students. We have also identified significant growth in housing and anticipate more students entering the district. Our proposed restructuring will ensure we can manage this growth while maintaining equity across schools. It will also keep adding mobile classrooms or modular units from being an option and keep students inside school buildings for safety reasons.

7. How will the district ensure equitable distribution of resources across schools post-restructuring?

Answer: We will develop new school district lines to accommodate growth while ensuring that each school remains as equitable as possible in terms of demographics and resources. We are committed to making decisions that are in the best interests of our students and community.

8. How does the district plan to address the transportation concerns raised in the presentation?

Answer: Currently, some elementary students spend up to two hours riding buses one way. By restructuring the schools into a PreK-5 model, we can reduce the travel time for many students. This will create a more efficient and manageable transportation system, especially as the student population continues to grow. Elementary buses will no longer have to drop off and pick up at every elementary school but rather will be assigned to their zoned elementary school.

9. What are the projected costs for the proposed renovations to Eastanollee Elementary School to reopen it?

Answer: Renovating Eastanollee Elementary to reopen and to protect this investment would cost approximately \$10.5 million. This includes necessary updates to the building's infrastructure, like roof, HVAC, plumbing, septic system, and fire alarm system. In comparison, building a new school in a neighboring county is around \$28 million. In addition, the cost for a neighboring system that added a 10-classroom wing cost was \$11 million.

Renovation to Eastanollee Elementary will be paid from SPLOST. The current average collection per month of the 2022 SPLOST is \$471,000.

Note: Portions of the Eastanollee building have housed various SCSS departments, the Stephens County 4-H Extension Service, and Mountain Education. This building has been receiving ongoing maintenance during this time but major renovations are needed to keep the building functional whether it is used as a full-time school or not. For example, the HVAC system is at the end of its lifetime usage. The new school will add 35+ classrooms and 600 seats for students.

10. What will happen to the current tenants in the Eastanollee School Building?

Answer: System Administration will meet with Mountain Education and SC 4-H Extension and will work with them to provide adequate space if available and needed.

11. What are the next steps in the process?

Answer: After the presentation to the BOE on October 15, 2024, the BOE gathered feedback from the public through an online form, and this feedback was emailed to the BOE for review before the called meeting on October 29, 2024. The public was also invited to sign up for the public participation portion of the meetings.

The BOE voted to restructure the elementary schools on October 29, 2024, and school officials will begin the multi-year planning process immediately. Future meetings regarding the redistricting process will be announced. The restructuring and reopening of Eastanollee Elementary will be effective in the 2026-2027 school year.

We are committed to ensuring a transparent process and will communicate updates to all stakeholders. Parents will receive updates through the Parent Portal, emails, and social media. The dedicated webpage for restructuring information will also be updated at www.stephenscountyschools.com/district-information/board-of-education/elementary-structure.