

Closing South Elementary School a necessary but tough decision

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Sometimes circumstances dictate that administrators and school boards have to make tough decisions. The compass for those decisions should always be what is best for the students and preserving the district's stability for future generations of students. We are stewards of our community's tax dollars, but just as importantly we also are guardians of our community's future through the educational opportunities we provide to our schoolchildren.

Those were the guiding principles behind the difficult decision the Board of Education made Monday night to close the South Elementary School Building next year. Even though circumstances clearly dictated the need to close a building – declining enrollment, state budget cuts the past seven years and the repair and upgrades needed for the 62-year-old building – we were very cognizant of the history and memories that the South Elementary building holds for many of our citizens.

The decisions were not made in a vacuum. A committee consisting of four teachers, four non-support staff, two parents, two community members, our four principals, two board members and I studied all of the facts and discussed options. The bottom line for the committee was that by closing a building we can save enough money (an estimated minimum of \$300,000 per year) to keep all of our teachers, preserve our academic and extra-curricular programs, and maintain current class sizes. Those are student-centered outcomes.

So the decision then became which school to close. The main reasons for choosing to close the South Elementary building included:

- The building has accessibility problems that were going to require at least \$200,000 of work within the next four years to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates according to a settlement schedule reached with the Attorney General's Office.
- The proximity of the railroad tracks to South Elementary was a concern regarding the possibility of a derailment and emergency response capability.
- The building also is close to the water plant, which experienced a chlorine leak last year that caused us to evacuate the building.
- The windows are in need of replacement.
- Unlike the North Intermediate Education Center, the gym at South Elementary is too small to accommodate games or events.
- The North building is more centrally located and not in need of the same amount of repair work as South Elementary.

Even given all of those factors, the recommendation was one over which the committee agonized. The committee has agreed to continue its work to help guide us through the next steps of determining where the students and teachers from South Elementary will be reallocated.

And even though we have plenty of space in our other three buildings to relocate the students and teachers from South Elementary, the Board did not take lightly its unanimous decision to close the building. However, given the circumstances, in the final determination we all agreed it was the best decision we could make for our students, our school district and our community going forward.