

Elementary School Reconfiguration / Consolidation

Prepared by Save Amherst's Small Schools - <https://saveamherstssmallschools.wordpress.com>

WHAT IS THE AMHERST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL RECONFIGURATION / CONSOLIDATION PROPOSAL AND

WHERE DID IT COME FROM? The proposal is to close Fort River school and turn Amherst's three elementary schools into two "unified" schools. All preK-1 students in Amherst will go to Crocker Farm and all 2-6 students will go to a new building at the Wildwood site. The planned new 2-6 building will have two twin schools in one building.

OUR CONCERNS:

- **School size and grade cohort size.** 750 elementary students will be in the new building. The twin schools will share a gym, cafeteria, library, fields, entryway and parking lots. There will be about 80 students per grade in each twin school (160 students per grade in the building), 160 per grade at Crocker Farm, compared to today's 55. Research shows large grade cohort sizes make schools feel big and more alienating for students, teachers, and parents. Smaller schools and smaller grade cohorts make schools safer.
- **Shorter grade spans.** School reconfiguration / consolidation will add a major transition between 1st and 2nd grade. Transitions have been found to be harmful for students. Longer grade spans support students with long-term relationships with many adults. These relationships are especially important for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds as well as those with social and emotional challenges. Also, longer grade span schools keep siblings together longer; this supports kids and eases logistics for parents.
- **Threats to equity, diversity and inclusion.** Equity should not be reduced to having identical resources at everyone's school. Equitable outcomes, and deep sociocultural awareness and respect, are more important. The proposed reconfiguration is likely to cause disproportionate negative impact on low-income, minority, and English-language-learner students, as well as those who struggle with emotional and social challenges:
 - Long-term relationships with trusted adults, often teachers from prior years, are crucial resources for minority, low-income and special needs students. There will be fewer of these, for shorter time spans.
 - Discipline statistics are harsher at larger schools; these tend to fall most heavily on minority students.
 - Low-income parents who do not own a car will be unable to get to their children's more distant school quickly and easily, causing hardship for them and diminishing their involvement in their children's school.
 - Participation rates in all-school activities go down for students as grade size increases; research shows this is more pronounced for minority and low-income students.
 - The diverse students who today share Amherst's small K-6 schools gain deep mutual familiarity and understanding. This will be reduced as grade cohort size increases and grade span decreases.
- **Loss of neighborhood schools.** Neighborhood schools are nearby schools attended by everyone in the same neighborhood. While Amherst's schools are not within walking or biking distance of all students' homes, they are close enough that parents can get to their children's school with a short drive or a moderate bike or bus ride. Feeder neighborhoods need not all be contiguous; Amherst today rightly ensures diversity in its schools by having geographically diverse areas feed into each neighborhood school. What are the advantages of neighborhood schools? Young children have accessible friendships; this helps them develop social skills and greater independence. Neighborhoods become rich with inter-family friendships and mutual support; they are safer. Parents who do not own cars can access their children's school by bus, bike or walking. Adults and children can develop healthier, more active lifestyles, especially as Amherst continues to follow its transportation plan to connect village centers with sidewalks, bus routes, and bike lanes.
- **Transportation: cost, time, equity and sustainability.** School consolidation means that all students will go to a more distant school for at least part of their elementary school years (K-1 or 2-6 or both). As a result:
 - *School bus time and/or cost.* Either students will face considerably longer bus-ride times or the Town will pay significantly higher busing costs. The School District expects to spend an extra \$220,000 annually.

- *Low-income parents without cars* will have a harder time getting to their children's school. For example, parents in Village Park who can now walk to their children's school at Wildwood will face a 45 minute two-bus-and-walking trip to Crocker Farm to get to their child's kindergarten and 1st grade.
- *A less sustainable Amherst.* More buses, longer bus runs and the loss of neighborhood schools mean more consumption of natural resources, more carbon emissions, and less opportunity for students to learn to walk or bike home from school or from their home to friends' houses.
- **Costs.** Research shows larger consolidated schools are not as economical as often assumed.
 - *Construction cost estimates* are about \$65 million. Of this, about \$31 million would be paid by the Town. However, there are likely to be other construction-related expenses that will be borne by the Town, including decommissioning Fort River, and renovating Crocker Farm from a preK-6 to a preK-1 facility.
 - *Annual operation costs* are expected to go down somewhat with consolidated schools. The School District claims it will save about \$580,000 per year by cutting five teacher positions, one assistant principal and three custodians, and reducing food service costs. However, over \$200,000 of this will be consumed to increase school bus runs. Other costs will emerge.
- **Teacher collaboration & experience.** Dissemination of district initiatives and professional "best practices" will be better if all teachers in a grade are at one school. However, deep partner collaboration, teachers' sense of agency and ownership, and inter-grade articulation will all be better in small PreK-6 schools.
- **Student experience.** In a new double-sized twin school, students will have a new building, equipment, resources and programming. But precious things they have now will diminish: a close and long-term identity with their school, a sense of agency, and the ability to mature slowly with self-confidence.
- **Loss of outdoor open space.** The current plan significantly reduces outdoor open play space at the Wildwood site in order to fit the new building, and its much larger parking and bus zones.
- **Opposition from teachers and parents.** Many community members have recognized these and other concerns and spoken out. A survey of staff and parents conducted in January 2016 found that only one third of staff/parents were even "open to considering" grade-reconfigured options.
- **Lack of an open decision process.** The plan was prepared in the name of fixing problems with the Wildwood building, and the state may pay for about 50% of the cost. However, when discussions became public in fall 2015, the "Wildwood building plan" had become a town-wide elementary school consolidation plan. As community opposition increased, the School District brought in new issues. It became clear that district leadership had been interested in school consolidation for several years, and used building problems and state funding as a route to achieve this otherwise unpopular goal. In School District meetings and materials, concerns about neighborhood schools, grade cohort size, sustainable transportation, and other equity concerns (see above) were largely ignored or dismissed. A particularly disturbing part of the process was that although "equity" was repeatedly invoked as a goal, there seemed to be little effort to bring the voices and participation of parents from low-income, minority, and English-language-learner communities into decision making.

WHAT OTHER OPTIONS COULD THERE BE? There are several options for school configuration that would allow improvements to Amherst's elementary school buildings, while retaining neighborhood K-6 schools. Several would also help with the School District's concerns about districting, costs, and universal access to programs. Options:

- Build a twin K-6 school at the Wildwood site to house Wildwood and Fort River. (Only this one was considered.)
- Renovate one school now; go back into pool for state funding for the other – likely to come through in 10-20 years. Fort River may deserve priority, as the building problems are worse.
- Convert the Middle School into an elementary school.
- Use state money to renovate Wildwood, while the Town renovates Fort River. (Article 38 could assist with this.)
- Reduce from three to two neighborhood PreK-6 schools, by using state funding to build a new PreK-6 school at Wildwood and having the Town build additions at Crocker Farm (could be modular classrooms until further funding is secured).