Long Range Planning Committee Minutes – February 5, 2020

Attendees: Tom Burnell, Edwin Davenport, Stephen Jenkins, John Kemnitzer, Brett King, Diane Lyons, Joe Phelan, Jaclyn Savolainen

In advance of this meeting, the committee had asked Joe (who passed along the request to the principals) for a detailed picture of what would happen to the master schedules and teaching loads if the district were to reach a time when we have 60 students per grade level. This number would be lower than our projections for the next 5 years, but considering how small this year’s kindergarten is, the committee wanted a “worst-case” view for the future.

Dr. Davenport reviewed with the committee a simulated report to show potential conflicts for course requests using a hypothetical scenario with fewer sections and fewer students but based on typical course requests. Running fewer sections with the current master schedule would cause some students to lose electives. However, there is potential for rearranging the schedule, as well as for guidance counselors to work with individual students to resolve conflicts. This simulation does not reflect possible impacts of offering certain electives on an every-other-year basis. Dr. Davenport also ran a simulated master schedule based on a premise of 60% of the current enrollment numbers (which would be 189 students and therefore even smaller than the number requested by the committee). Reducing the number of students would cause there to be many classes with very few students and would likely lead to combining sections for fewer total offerings.

Mr. Kemnitzer presented an estimate of how many sections would be needed for each subject area if there were 60 students per grade. A number of questions were raised about the impacts of such a scenario on unbalanced sections, shared staff, impact on band/chorus, impact on teaming, and additional support programs. If each grade went from 4 sections to 3, teachers would need to be redeployed in a different way and some positions might ultimately be eliminated. Mr. Kemnitzer assured the committee that team times could be preserved in the master schedule even if some middle school teachers will be teaching more than one grade (including high school) or more than one subject. Joe mentioned that when he was an English teacher, he regularly taught multiple grades across a wide range within any given year and that was the norm. Dr. Davenport said he did the same. Later in the meeting, the group discussed content area certification requirements and the challenges/opportunities the district will have if we need teachers with more than one content area certification.

Tom went over enrollment projections and talked about the range of possible projections due to the fact that each cohort and each year is unique and unpredictable in terms of enrollment. Overall, however, using data from the past 3 years, 5 years, and 10 years, Tom ascertained that the average cohort increases between 12.3 and 14 total students from kindergarten through 12th grade.

There was discussion about how to preserve the middle school model even with changes and/or disruptions to routine and enrollment. Smaller class sizes offer opportunities for doing more with social and emotional learning in smaller sections. The group also talked about the impact of having a higher proportion of special education and special needs students as total enrollment declines while the number of special needs students remains fairly stable.

Mr. King brought up a number of reasons against moving the 6th graders into CLS, including logistical challenges and the goal of providing the most developmentally appropriate environment for that age student. He brought articles from journals focused on middle school education that advocate for the preservation of the middle school model. He doesn’t see the value to bringing 6th grade into CLS. Dr. Davenport questioned whether 6th graders would still be able to receive 180 minutes of content area
instruction each week if they were in CLS. He also expressed concern about how the high school master schedule could incorporate 7th and 8th grades.

Both Dr. Davenport and Mr. Kemnitzer shared with the committee how they have been working together for several years in anticipating eventual retirements and absorbing responsibilities among existing staff to keep teachers full-time and to accommodate class size changes. The principals expressed that they believe staffing levels can be managed through attrition and carefully looking at whether each position needs to be replaced. Joe suggested that the long range plan could formalize that approach so that teachers know what to expect and can plan accordingly.

Dr. Davenport noted that, if instructed to do so, the administration can work to innovate and improve instruction or they can work to achieve cost savings but that it may not be possible to do both, which is what the committee is hoping for. Can we economize and innovate at the same time?

Steve noted that he has several articles from a range of education journals that support K-6 (and K-8) models with research showing minimal negative impacts on students while improving cost efficiency in districts. He asked the principals if they could help us to look at the hypotheticals without rejecting the idea up front. The principals showed a strong interest in meeting again with the committee and sharing the different research each group has found.

Diane talked about how the committee has looked at a lot of different ideas over the past few years to address the dual challenges of declining enrollment and financial limitations. She noted that the committee has not determined that a restructuring of the schools is the only solution. However, all of the other options that have been discussed do not seem to address both challenges, whereas restructuring to K-6 and 7-12 seems to have the potential to do so, and that is why the committee is asking for the principals to study the matter and come up with ideas for how to preserve the best aspects of the middle school model even if the schools were to be restructured.