The Journey to Closing Rural Schools

River Valley School District
Introductions

Dr. Thomas R. Wermuth, District Administrator
Ms. Kathy Jennings, School Board President
Ms. Sara Young, School Board Member
Ms. Lisa Kjos, Pupil Services Director
Mr. Jaime Hegland, Elementary Director/Principal
Mr. Brian Krey, Director of Activities & Academic Services
Background & History

- Consolidation in 1962 - “River Valley”
  - 4 Villages
  - 17 Municipalities Total
  - 296.1 Miles - Large Geographic District
- Internal conversations for a few decades
- 2010
  - 1 High School, 1 Middle School, 4 Elementary schools
  - Declining Enrollment
Background & History

2011-2012

- ‘Consolidation Fact-Finding Committee’
  - Fiscal Analysis, Building Capacities, Public Debate
  - Board decided to “table discussion of hub school concept until time comes when consideration is necessary.”
January 12, 2016 - January 17, 2017

- Administrative Recommendation to close 2 of 4 elementary schools
  - March 2016: Board of Education tabled recommendation and voted to go to Referendum in November 2016
    - November 2016 Referendum to keep all schools open failed (52%-48%)
January 12, 2016 - January 17, 2017

- Administrative Team proposes closure of 2 schools (January 17, 2017)
  - Educational Benefits
    - Address Concerns
  - 5 Year Proposal
    - Financial Forecast, Recommended Reductions, Estimated Savings, Action Items
January 12, 2016 - January 17, 2017

- Configuration Memo
- Configuration Charts
- Board Approved
  - 6-3 Vote
Peer Effects

What does the data say about Peer Effects and Low Achieving Students? What does the data say about homogenous grouping?

In analyzing the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, it is concluded that:

- The peer effect is a particularly strong influence in academic achievement, especially at the elementary level.
- The peer effect is independent of other factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, income, and other background variables.
- Family background factors such as household environment and parental education also play an important role in explaining achievement in both the fourth and eighth grades.
- High ability students may succeed in any ability grouping style. Average ability students showed better group performance in homogenous ability groups but tested better as a result of heterogeneous grouping. Low ability students experienced much greater academic achievement as a result of heterogeneous ability groups.
District Data

**Elementary School Make-Up**
Two elementary schools were close to or above having 50% of students who were economically disadvantaged (47% and 66%). The other two elementary schools were below 30%.

**5-year median Advanced + Proficient Reading score on WSAS:**
- All: 43.6%
- Econ. Disad: 34.65%

**5-year median Advanced + Proficient Math score on WSAS:**
- All: 57.75%
- Econ. Disad: 45.4%

**4-year median Participation on ACT:**
- Not Econ. Disad: 55%
- Econ. Disad: 12%

**5-year median # of AP Exams Taken:**
- Not Econ. Disad: 96%
- Econ. Disad: 13%

**5-year trend % of Post-Secondary Enrollment:**
- Not Econ. Disad: 71.3%
- Econ. Disad: 34.3%
Biggest Challenge was Unknown

- What’s best for kids...
- Staff
  - Reductions (whole staff - not just at the buildings being closed)
    - Early as possible (January)
  - Many moving parts (grade levels, buildings, classrooms)
    - 3 out of 28 teachers remained in same classroom
    - Grade Level Teams - Starting from scratch
      - Staff survey - what did they want to teach? Where did they feel they best fit in
      - Completed in March
      - Time to work together before summer & fall
    - Communicated to Families
      - Teacher Requests
  - Dealing with change
    - Worried about immediate concerns and me personally
Biggest Challenge was Unknown

- Parents
  - “Who will my child’s teacher be?”
  - Transportation
- Physical Building
  - Changes, painting, etc
- Busing Students
  - Communicated at Registration day on July 31

- Great Staff, Quality Teams
  - What’s best for students
- Continuing to take on challenges
Lessons Learned

- Communicating with Community
  - Emotions & Politics
- Administrative Pressure & Morale
Closing School in Represented Area

- Voting to close school in represented area
- Emotional Toll
  - Personal
  - Board of Education & Administration
Summary

- Regardless of any work you’ve done in the past or in the present
  - Emotion will be front and center
    - Can’t discount emotion and it can’t be overlooked - and must address to community members, parents, and staff
  - Most difficult people where over age 55
    - Emotionally invested