

Wells Memorial School Community Forum
November 14, 2009 - 8:30 am-1:00 pm

Purpose:

Harrisville parents, community members, staff, administrators, and School Board gathered in the WMS gym for an open forum on ways to proactively address declining enrollment. Jack Calhoun, the School Board chair, asked participants to think as broadly and imaginatively as possible, without concern for physical and fiscal feasibility which will be weighed later in the process.

Process:

Wayne Woolridge and Tim Ruehr, (SAU Superintendent and Business Administrator) provided the audience with graphs showing steady decline in WMS enrollment and steady increases in cost per student over the past 10 years, but noted that these are district-wide and state-wide problems, not Harrisville's alone. Until this year, WMS enrollment had remained steady for a few years due to "School of Choice" students tuitioned in from other towns. But as that program ends next year, enrollment may drop to under 40 students.

Lizann Peyton, a facilitator from Norwich, Vermont, sent participants into small break-out groups to brainstorm as many ideas as quickly as possible, and come back to the full group with their top priorities. During the report-outs, Jack Calhoun scribed the priorities into a "mind map" that clustered themes, and participants then voted for their top four priorities. During lunchtime, participants sat at tables by theme and brainstormed next steps that should be investigated.

Priorities:

The suggestions fall into two broad categories – with details on the following pages:

- Attracting more families with young children into the district (marketing, zoning and housing affordability, international student recruitment)
- Investigate alternative program structures and building uses (e.g. K-8, combine with another town, public charter school, adult education, Children's Center, re-examine fixed costs)

Next steps:

As follow-up to the Forum, the School Board will invite input from those who couldn't attend, and create a process for investigating and weighing today's ideas, with a commitment to frequent and open communication with town residents. Anyone with further ideas or an interest in joining a follow-up work group is encouraged to get in touch with any of the School Board members.

Improve zoning and affordability: *****

- Build multi-family and cluster family options
- Allow duplex and multi-family (3 or more) housing in Agricultural/Residential zone
- Increase allowable size of accessory apartments from current 800 sq. feet to – 1400??
- Add lakeside accessory apartments by special exception
- Implement conservation subdivision (mandatory with exemptions) e.g. exempt five or fewer dwelling units and no new road
- Partner with other groups in town *
- Offer family tax credits
- New? NH state law – community must have affordable housing



Explore alternative school structures

- Expand another 2 grades, to K-8
- Explore the Sullivan-Gilsum Model **** (e.g. both towns send all K-3 students to one school, all 4-6 students to the other school)
- Combine with other schools (e.g. Roxbury, Nelson) *****
- Look at Choice School options *****
- Look at public charter school options *****
- Research other places to find sustainable teaching models for small schools **



- Look at the public pre-school option *****
- Combine with the Children’s Center **
- Adopt-a-kid program (e.g. homestay for international students whose families want them to get a Western education) *

Investigate the option of public charter schools:

- What would be the draw?
- How would it be marketed?
- What is the process and how long would it take?
- How is it governed and by whom?
- What would be the cost difference to what we have now? How would cost per student change?
- Are we bound by the same state and federal mandates in curriculum, staffing, etc?
- Look at other charter schools in New Hampshire – how well are they doing?
- Assess how many more families would come to WMS – What is the process of assessment?
- Would we lose other funding? How much more would have to be raised?
- Side question: Can you run a “private” school using tax dollars as long as you guarantee education for Harrisville residents? What would be the cost differential per student?
- What other communities would we target and draw from?
- What transportation issues and costs would be involved?
- How do we avoid “us vs. them” mentality? (taking kids from other towns)

- Thinking regionally, is there a long-term possibility of creating separate charter (or magnet) schools in towns that would help all towns?

Combine schools

- Educate the community that 5 kids per class may be too small, 15 is OK and sustainable
- Combine with Nelson? Roxbury?
- Bring 7-8 grades back from Keene for both towns and have K-5 at one school (Nelson?) and 6-8 at the other school (Harrisville?) (loss of sports, etc. from the Middle School?)
- Advantage is keeping kids in the community
- What would be the teacher qualifications? Finances? Transportation?



Investigate alternative building uses: *****

- Adult education? Children's Center consolidation? Outside district
- Continue to develop strong ed programming ****
- Re-assess fixed costs of building
- Look into operating cost reductions *

Create WMS as a school of destination *****

- Adult education and training programs **
- International homestays *****
- Invite a guest speaker to a Q&A evening, e.g. from A.F.S.
- Let the district know of our interest
- Could we have a "Sister School" program?
- Could we find enough housing?
- What is the community buy-in to have a small population of international students living in Harrisville?
- What are the start-up and long-term costs – and where would this money come from?
- Research why folks choose private school or home-schooling (bridge – get homeschoolers to take classes at WMS?)
- Understand marginal costs – capacity utilization (e.g. charge out-of-district students less than full tuition to make it affordable to come here) ***



APPENDIX: Ideas generated by each small group

GROUP 1 IDEAS:

- Town promotion factors: website use, marketing the town
- Local zoning/affordable workforce housing – increase town population with school-age children
- Make WMS a school of destination: promote the program we have, expand program options to increase enrollment
- Connect to other towns, including adult ed
- Unite with other (private) schools and training programs
- Assess future strategic trends and position Harrisville well within that
- K-8
- Dialogue with other localities with similar issues
- Keep/retain existing families
- Self-promotion to families
- Close the school
- Reach out to homeschoolers
- Turn WMS into a magnet or charter school
- Do a joint venture with other private schools
- Expand School of Choice
- Market our excellence – isolation factor – promote beyond test scores – link with local housing info
- Consolidate with local schools (Nelson and Marlborough?)
- Chesterfield model (K-8): increase enrollment, lower busing, change per-pupil cost
- Mount Missionary connection?
- Teaching school
- Outsource property/function of education to a private school, managing this aspect with access for locals
- Look at school usage other than education
- Move Harrisville Children's Center to Wells
- Reduce costs/review fixed costs
- Adult education – education-related skills class – technical training – unified regional training
- Eliminate the growth moratorium in Harrisville
- Boarding school component
- Extend school options to attract groups of students
- Access to more demographic data on families with school age children
- Understand the decision-making process on how families pick schools

GROUP 2 IDEAS:

- More cold nights, no TV in the bedroom!
- Affordable workforce housing
- Town's growth permitting process
- Zoning issues – multifamily and in-law apartments
- Advertise or sell the schools
- Tuition students
- Public/charter schools
- Keep Harrisville students at WMS
- Public pre-school option
- Merge school districts
- After school program
- Other uses of building – fees?
- Assessment of fixed costs (lights, heat, etc.)
- Tax abatements/credits for families with children attending WMS

- Family incentives

GROUP 3 IDEAS:

- The problem is not the school, but demographics: The Town needs to address the issue of what it would be without a school (town will die without young people/children)
 - How do you attract people with young children? Regional issue - housing affordability, jobs, no night-life – and part of an overall declining population trend
- Need family housing: could we create/inspire a privately initiated “cluster” of houses (energy efficient, affordable, proximate to the village, store, beach, community garden)
- Could we attract Roxbury or Nelson kids here?
- Can WMS become a public charter school?
- Can we solve the problem more regionally, e.g. regional consolidation? But towns want their own schools...
- Put energy into keeping WMS going well – run a good school, solid reputation
- Combine Children’s Center with WMS?
- Public charter school?
- K-5? K-8?

GROUP 4 IDEAS:

- Develop new programs to attract more young families to Harrisville
 - Create a “waiting list” for people looking for housing in Harrisville
 - Partner with local realtors to position Harrisville as a bedroom community to Keene
 - Increase opportunities for young families – entrepreneurship
 - Increase advertising/promotion of Harrisville to young communities/young people
 - Create an accessible database for affordable housing in Harrisville
- Look for students from neighboring towns without schools
- Collaborate with neighboring small schools/towns (including Dublin)
- Establish a boarding school program
- Have a meeting with homeschool parents
- Establish a busing program
- Re-establish the “School of Choice” program
- Establish environmental and ecological curriculum for students as a model program
- Establish an exemplary arts program
- Partner with businesses and local organizations for young family housing opportunities (example: help property owners develop/renovate for affordable spaces)
- Offer continuing education opportunities at the school
- Partner with the Children’s Center for long-term sustainability, gather data
- Maintain the high quality staff at WMS
- Create a Choice program for families of SAU 29 town school to send kids to the town of their choice

GROUP 5 IDEAS:

- Combine with another school (here)
- Create a regional school or magnet school
- Become a public charter school
- Subsidize purchase of land or home for families with children
- Encourage affordable housing
- Develop interesting programs for parents and children outside school
- Better advertise the before and after school program
- Become a magnet for immigrants
- Invite Chinese students to live here using host families
- Reach out to homeschoolers and private school students
- Dramatically lower the tuition/marginal rate for out of town students
- Improve the web site and positioning (ease of access when searching the web)

- Promote the quality of WMS through advertising

GROUP 6 IDEAS: - merged into the mind map priorities

GROUP 7 IDEAS:

- Recruit/promote in town and surrounding towns
- Look for budget cuts: teachers, administrators, benefits, programs, school supplies
- Combine schools: grade 6, add grade 7-8, combine schools K-4 and 5-8, combine kindergarten among schools
- Explore the charter school option
- Invite teachers and staff to be part of the solution

GROUP 8 IDEAS:

- Bring 7th and 8th grade back from Keene
- Bring in students from other towns
 - Re-create another Choice program
 - Regional consolidation – the Sullivan K-2/Gilsum 3-5 model
 - Combine with Nelson, Marlborough, etc.
- Bring more kids into Harrisville
 - Provide a tax credit to families with children
 - Develop affordable housing
 - Appeal to those not choosing WMS (homeschool, private, etc.)
 - Adopt-a-kid” for 9 months – become a magnet school for city kids, refugees, international students
 - Sell WMS benefits – and Harrisville benefits
- Consider the charter school model – could WMS be a charter school?
- Do nothing
- Close WMS
- Lower costs or share costs
 - Re-examine fixed costs
 - Get more special ed funding from outside the district
- Explore multi-use of WMS (rent space to Children’s Center or the Town)
- Do whole-community visioning – how could we get more families in Harrisville?
- Transportation to-from Keene?
- Ask staff for ideas

GROUP 9 IDEAS:

- Find out why parents choose private school or homeschooling over WMS
- Maximize education by cutting costs/cutting building use
- Bring middle schoolers back
- Send elementary/middle school to Marlborough
- Marketing to attract people to the school and the community
- Zoning changes to promote affordable housing
- Charter school: attracting students from other communities
- Combine with another school