

Centennial sees positives in its elementary school consolidation

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, August 25, 2015 4:00 am

When the Centennial School District decided to consolidate its six small elementary schools into three larger buildings five years ago, Jane Schrader Lynch voted against the plan.

Lynch, then a school director and now president of the board, is a believer in neighborhood schools.

“I’m from the old school,” she said. “I like children walking to school.”

Centennial, however, chose another direction. It spent close to \$80 million to build Davis and McDonald elementary schools and renovate Willow Dale. Gone are Leary, Longstreth and Stackpole, schools built in the 1950s and ‘60s, which board Vice President Mark Miller described as “dinosaurs.” They were sold to a local developer for a combined \$1.275 million.

And while she isn’t changing her tune that “little is better,” Lynch said, “After seeing what I’m seeing, these schools are working out very well.”

Before the consolidation, in 2010-11, Leary and Longstreth, both in Warminster, housed 367 and 351 students, respectively, while Stackpole, in Upper Southampton, had 469 students. After its renovation, Willow Dale, in Warminster, grew from 464 to 857 students when it opened in September 2011. McDonald, in Warminster, opened in 2013. It is the district’s most populated elementary with 882 students; Davis, in Upper Southampton, opened in 2012. It has 730 students.

The youngsters in the K-to-5 schools might lose some intimacy in their newer surroundings, but their educational experiences could be enhanced and provide greater opportunities, said Jennifer Polinchock, the district’s acting superintendent.

“You have the opportunity for kids to meet other students not immediately in their neighborhoods,” she said. “That allows them to interact with people from diverse backgrounds in elementary school before their opinions are set to take root.”

Polinchock said that with five or six sections in a grade instead of three before consolidation, “we’re better able to schedule students with similar needs together. They may also work with others who they’re not as comfortable or familiar with. This allows them to really put themselves out there before



Centennial Acting Superintendent Jennifer Polinchock. Photo by William Thomas Cain

cliques begin to formulate, they get to know more students and work toward a common goal. It better prepares them for what they'll experience later on in their education and professional careers.”

Building on Polinchock's point, Miller said that in the past some student services might have been limited to specific buildings. This required some students to attend schools different than their neighbors. With larger student populations in the schools, it allows for more uniform service in each building, Miller said, in addition to fostering more uniform class size. “We now have very few, if any, students who attend a school outside of their attendance zone,” he said.

Rob Pillar, of the architectural firm formerly known as Burt Hill, designed the buildings. He said his company studies the latest trends in education and designed schools to foster the best education for children.

He said Leary, Longstreth and Stackpole “were distracting for the learning environment” because of their age and how they were built. The larger, more modern schools have what he called “academic collaboration zones,” where youngsters can work together on different projects. “It's 21st century learning outside the confines of a classroom,” he said.

Long term, the costs of Centennial's plan are a money saver. The math is elementary: Maintaining three schools as opposed to six is less expensive.

“The larger facility does provide a scale of efficiency that helps the district from a financial standpoint by reducing operational costs,” said Pillar, whose firm has merged with Stantec.

“Certainly newer schools are much more cost-effective,” Polinchock said. “You're able to consolidate some staff. There's the economy of purchasing curriculum materials for three buildings, and that might present more thoughtful input than trying to divide that among six schools.”

While Centennial consolidated because its elementaries were “dinosaurs in terms of operating efficiency,” according to Miller, the Neshaminy School District made similar plans because of a shrinking student population.

Neshaminy's consolidation, which cost three school board members their seats, includes the closing of Samuel Everitt, in Middletown, last March, and the planned closures of Oliver Heckman, in Middletown, and Lower Southampton elementary schools at the end of the 2015-16 school year, building a new Tawanka Elementary School in Lower Southampton, and moving district fifth-graders to Neshaminy's three middle schools.

Nothing is certain, however, as a new board has yet to be seated. The three ousted board members, John V. Allen, Mark Shubin and Anthony Sposato, were proponents of the \$60 million consolidation plan underway.

“We hope people will be very pleased (with the consolidation),” said Chris Stanley, a district spokesman. “It will free up money to put back into programs, and not into buildings. We're bolstering the STEM program and added a reading program. ... A lot of things are changing, and it's really about

educational programs.”

The district’s student population peaked in the 1990s at 12,000 and has fallen to 8,300. “That trend has continued,” he said. “We felt like (we needed) to make the number of buildings fit the number of students.”

Like Centennial, Bristol Township chose to consolidate its nine aging elementaries into three state-of-the-art facilities. The tab is expected to be more than \$120 million for the three, 1,300-student schools.

James Buchanan and Ralph Waldo Emerson elementary schools, both in Levittown, originally scheduled to open for the new school year, are now expected to be ready for students in January.

Plans call for the opening of a new Mary Devine Elementary School in Croydon in time for the 2016-17 school year.

Miller, Centennial’s vice president, said that just to keep older schools like Leary, Longstreth and Stackpole “warm, safe and dry” would have required upgrades of \$10 million for each building “just to rent them for a few more years.”

Each of the new elementary schools has air conditioning, “a major issue,” Miller said. They are also safer, “A huge concern in this day and age,” Pillar added. They’re also compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and energy-efficient.

Miller said today’s elementary school energy bill is lower than before consolidation. In fact, it costs less to heat and cool William Tennent High School than it did the old McDonald elementary, he said.

Miller contends that the development of the three campuses will allow Centennial to become a state leader in digital learning.

“We can connect building to building, classroom to classroom from anywhere in the district,” he said. “As we continue to integrate technology into education, we are upgrading the way we will be delivering content to our students. Teachers will be able to demonstrate to students actual concepts graphically to make delivery more impactful.”

However, between 20 percent and 30 percent more students take buses to and from school than before the consolidation, Miller estimates. “That was the trade-off to get the job done,” he said. “We don’t have as many children walking as we did before. But we couldn’t afford to build six schools.”

The busing is one of Lynch’s pet peeves. Still, she understands there’s no turning back. “I accept the decision of the board,” she said. “I think these schools are great now. The community has blended very well.”