Port Monmouth/New Monmouth Consolidation Proposal

Q & A

1. Why is this proposal happening now?

There are many reasons why the consolidation is being proposed at this time.

When the S2 bill was signed into law in July 2018, it had an immediate impact on Middletown’s schools. The full implementation of this law takes place over a seven year period, starting with the 2018-2019 budget year, and will result in a projected reduction in state aid of $5.5 million. The district has discussed at board meetings and at its strategic planning forums the anticipated growing budget shortfalls going forward and the need to make changes in our operations and our district footprint in order to preserve our programs and services. At our last budget meeting, the current projected budget shortfall for 2020-2021 of $2.5 million was included in the presentation. The district has been working to find ways to address this that are not in conflict with our mission and the priorities identified during the strategic planning forums and survey that have taken place over the last several months.

Throughout the strategic planning process, the community overwhelmingly requested that a priority be placed on reducing class size. Research points to smaller class sizes leading to improved student achievement in Title 1 schools. Therefore, the district is working to focus funding on Title 1 schools for class size reduction and other initiatives that will impact student achievement. While the district’s enrollment continues to decrease, the district’s current structure does not allow for optimal management of class sizes. After analyzing the elementary school enrollment data across the district and reviewing specific scenarios, it became evident that by consolidating Port Monmouth and New Monmouth Schools, lower class size averages could be achieved at the same time as reductions in operating costs and more effective use of federal grant funds to assist at-risk students.

The district has also been working on updating its Long Range Facilities Plan, which identifies significant maintenance and improvement projects for each district building over the next five years. The Plan includes over $3.8 million in identified facilities projects for the Port Monmouth building and site. These needed projects are not for improvements that will enhance the facility to meet 21st century learning requirements. Currently, at 92 years old, the school’s educational and common spaces, such as the gymnasium/cafeteria, do not have the capacity or other essential components of an optimal learning environment. New Monmouth School, the district’s newest elementary school, is a flagship facility in the district and can meet the needs of all Port Monmouth and New Monmouth students. Consolidating both schools at this time will provide funding for class size reduction, preserve programs and staffing, and ensure a learning environment that supports students’ educational needs in an equitable manner.

2. If adopted, when will this transition take effect and how are you preparing for a smooth transition for students?

The proposal is for the 2020-2021 school year, with a plan for transition to begin during this school year. Although the consolidation plan is still a proposal, the building administrators are planning on organizing visitations by the Port Monmouth students to New Monmouth School by grade level. Students will tour their new school, meet the principal and staff, and have the
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opportunity to meet and spend time with their new classmates. Joint activities will also be planned. Additional opportunities to orient the students to their new school and encourage social interactions among the students will be planned after Board approval of the proposal. The goal is for Port Monmouth students to be comfortable and excited to attend their new school in September and for the New Monmouth students to be eager to see their new friends when they return to school.

3. Are 12 additional classrooms available at New Monmouth for Port Monmouth students?

Twelve additional classrooms will be available at New Monmouth School for the Port Monmouth students. New Monmouth School is the newest elementary school in the district. It has the largest all purpose room as well as a large fenced in playground.

4. Are you looking at future township development projects to project school enrollment? Will there be enough room for new students with Port Monmouth closed?

Our last five year enrollment projection, which was done in January 2017, took into consideration the approved new developments at that time. These district wide projections have been within 1% - 2% accuracy when compared with actual enrollments for the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school years. The projections indicated that the district’s enrollment would continue to decrease each year through 2022. The October 15, 2019 enrollment at Port Monmouth was 8% lower than the 2019-2020 projected enrollment. An updated five year enrollment projection will be performed this spring as the district works on completing its strategic plan for 2020-2025.

5. How does transitioning students from Port Monmouth to New Monmouth lower class sizes?

Consolidating the schools creates a larger Title 1 school. A portion of the district’s Title 1 funds can be used for class size reduction. In addition, the consolidation will result in reduced costs to the district and the ability to more efficiently utilize budget revenues. Available financial resources will be focused on reducing class size by adding additional elementary class sections as well as preserving programs and services.

6. Are you placing people with the best expertise with their students? When will teachers know where they are being placed?

A component of our efforts to ensure the best education for the Port Monmouth and New Monmouth students is purposefully reviewing our staffing needs and assigning staff to best meet the needs of the students. Improving student achievement in our Title 1 schools, which includes New Monmouth School, is a priority. The consolidation of the two schools will provide more resources, including certificated staff, to provide instruction, remediation and enrichment.
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Once the district’s tentative budget is approved, the staffing process will take place. We anticipate the process will be completed by mid-May. The annual Board of Education rehire meeting is scheduled for May 13. Changes are possible due to retirement and resignation notices received after that time.

7. Will staff be laid off?

A reduction in force (RIF) of staff is not anticipated due to the consolidation of Port Monmouth and New Monmouth Schools. A goal of the consolidation proposal is to reduce class size. To accomplish this, additional class sections are needed which require certified staff members. There are some non-certified positions or certified support staff positions that may be eliminated due to the consolidation. We anticipate that the staff members in those positions will be reassigned as we lose staff throughout the district through attrition, which occurs every year.

8. Will transportation be provided for students?

Transportation will be provided to eligible students in accordance with state requirements and board policy. Currently 65% of Port Monmouth’s students are eligible for transportation.

At this time, the district runs three bus routes for Port Monmouth students. It is anticipated that one additional bus route will be needed for Port Monmouth students under the consolidation proposal. The cost for the additional bus route has been considered in the consolidation proposal.

9. What will happen with preschool classes?

Preschool classes housed at New Monmouth will be relocated. Currently, Harmony School and Ocean Avenue School host a portion of the district’s preschool program. Several of the New Monmouth classes will be relocated to those schools. A decision on the placement of the other preschool classes will be made shortly.

10. How do class sizes differ among elementary schools?

The district has set elementary class size limits that apply to all district elementary schools. (K-3: 25 students; 4-5: 27 students) No elementary classes exceed that cap. Almost every elementary school in the district has one or more classes that reach the district’s class size limit, and every elementary school has classes that are within one student of the limit.

11. Why haven’t tax dollars gone toward the upkeep of Port Monmouth?
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The district has done continuing repair and maintenance at Port Monmouth over the past several years, including painting, sidewalk repairs, and carpet/floor replacements. Major work includes the installation of a new roof, a lighting upgrade, and the creation of a kitchen space in the building to facilitate the improvement of food service for the students.

12. What will be the cost of maintaining this unoccupied building?

The building will continue to be insured, there will still be a cost for utilities (at a reduced level), and maintenance will be done as needed. We estimate that these costs will not exceed $100k for a year. Continuing costs for this building and property are contingent upon the disposition or use of the site going forward.

13. Why was the consolidation of schools not mentioned in any of the Strategic Planning forums?

At the seven recent Strategic Planning forums, topics of redistricting, grade banding and changing the district’s footprint were discussed and commented upon. The comments most often heard from the community members at the forums and in the survey were class size concerns. As stated in the answer to question #1, this was a driver in developing the proposal.

14. What would the full costs be to have the school remain open?

The personnel and facilities operating costs allocated to Port Monmouth Elementary School are almost $2.8 million annually, not including capital projects in the Long Range Facilities Plan or other unexpected needs.

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16. If the school closes, what will happen to the building and property?

No decisions have been made at this time regarding plans for the building and property if the proposed consolidation plan is approved. There are many options available and they all have to be evaluated to determine what is in the best interest of the district and the community.