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## REDISTRICTING Q AND A

### **WHY REDISTRICTING IS OCCURRING:**

#### **Exactly why is the school district “redistricting”?**

The School Committee voted last spring to close Mark’s Meadow School due to declining district enrollment and increasing budgetary constraints; it was clearly possible to educate all of our K to 6 students in three schools, and doing so was estimated to save approximately \$700,000 per year. Concurrent with this decision, the Committee unanimously voted to redistrict to achieve greater equity among the schools. The percentage of students with free/reduced price lunch status was 54% at Crocker Farm last year, while Wildwood School was at 22%.

#### **Why is such economic disparity undesirable?**

Research shows that when the percentage of students on free/reduced lunch reaches 40% or greater, the achievement of all students in the school (100%) is negatively impacted.

#### **How did this disparity become so, well, disparate?**

Prior administrators and teachers at Crocker Farm School and in the district were aware that the percentage of economically disadvantaged students at that school was increasing over time. In 2007, the School Committee appointed a subcommittee to study this issue of inequity and how our schools were organized. This subcommittee included parents as well as teachers and principals and widely agreed on the problems with having schools with such different populations. However, a decision was made to not focus on redistricting in 2008 when Jere Hochman announced his resignation, leaving the district with interim leadership for 2008-2009. During this time, the number of kids on free/reduced lunch continued to climb, with the percentage of students on free/reduced lunch increasing by 9% at Crocker Farm (the school experiencing the largest increase).

#### **What about the other elementary schools in Amherst as it pertains to economic disparity?**

It is not just at Crocker Farm where this increase is occurring; however it is the school with the greatest percentage of economically disadvantaged students; an increase since 2005 of 16%. Since 2005, the percentages have increased by 7% at Fort River, have actually decreased by 4% at Mark’s Meadow, and increased at Wildwood by just 2%.

**Can you redistrict for equity without creating “islands” in the East Hadley Road area?**

It is not possible to place all the children in the single family homes, the Boulders, Hollister, Mill Valley, the Brook, and Southpoint without creating economic disparity at any one school in excess of 50%. The total number of students in this area is 177. Of these, 121 (68.4%) are on Free/Reduced lunch status. Because Crocker Farm can only fit 350 students, if these, and only these students are all placed at Crocker Farm, the percentage of students on Free/Reduced lunch is already 35% (the district average). Thus, we would have to bus all other kids in South Amherst who are on free/reduced lunch to other schools, including kids at other apartment complexes very close to Crocker Farm, kids in Orchard Valley, and so on.

	Total Children	FRLP	% FRLP
Houses	34	9	26.5%
Southpoint	42	38	90.5%
Mill Valley	42	35	83.3%
Hollister	5	4	80.0%
The Brook	25	13	52.0%
The Boulders	29	22	75.9%
	177	121	68.4%

**ENROLLMENT AND THE PURCHASE OF MODULARS AT MARK’S MEADOW SCHOOL:**

**What is the history of enrollments in our elementary schools?**

Ten years ago, in the 1999-2000 school year, our elementary schools served 1,538 children in Grades K-6. This enrollment had actually dropped by about 60 students from the prior year. Right now, our total K-6 enrollment is less than 1,270, a drop of 268 students in that 10-year period. A specific example is Wildwood, where K-6 enrollment was 516 students 10 years ago and is currently 386. Projections indicate that enrollment will continue to decline over the next few years. It is difficult to project enrollments beyond four or five years.

**If enrollments have been declining, why were modulars purchased for Mark’s Meadow School?**

A purchase of modulars at Mark’s Meadow was considered for several years before being purchased in 2008. The primary reason for the purchase was so that all of the Mark’s Meadow students could be educated at Mark’s Meadow School instead of sending “overflow” students to other schools. The purchase of the modulars increased building capacity from 10 classrooms to 12 classrooms.

**Overflow students?**

Yes – Mark’s Meadow School has actually had a more stable enrollment population than the other Amherst elementary schools. However, they had only 10 classroom spaces until the modulars were purchased. This means that when an incoming kindergarten class exceeded 20-22 students, the “overflow” students were sent to other Amherst schools. In a typical year, we have sent 4 – 8 kindergarten students elsewhere; however, in 2007-08, 10 kindergarten students were sent from Mark’s Meadow to Fort River School. In addition, when students arrived into the district in a grade or grades in which the classroom(s) could not accommodate an increased class size, these students too were sent to another elementary school and were provided transportation by the district.

**So, in the two years in which we have had the modulars, have they been used as classroom space?**

The modular space has been used for small group instruction but not as classroom space, which was their intended use when purchased. This is due to the challenging financial times we have been facing, and then the catastrophic budget cuts last year. The preference of the district is to keep students in their neighborhood school; however, we decided to continue sending overflow students to other schools even after the purchase of the modulars, so that we did not need to hire a kindergarten teacher at Mark’s Meadow to accommodate all the enrolled students. Currently, there are 9 classrooms in use this year at Mark’s Meadow, with class sizes ranging from 15 to 24 students.

**For the record, what was the purchase price of the modulars. Does this include installation?**

The total cost of the modulars and installation was \$213,000.

**If the modulars were to be moved, what would be the best location?**

So that the capacity of our buildings can be as equal as possible, the best location would be Crocker Farm School; however, there is no site on that property that will work well for the modular structure. In addition, there is no need for the modulars since all of the children K to 6 can fit in the existing classrooms that we have at the other three schools.

**What would it cost to move the modulars to another school location? Should this be done?**

It has been estimated that moving the modulars might cost \$140,000. The Redistricting Committee does not recommend moving the modulars. The School Committee will need to vote to declare the modular units located at Mark’s Meadow School as surplus property and request the Town of Amherst take the lead on the disposition bid process. We are hopeful that the Town of Amherst can replenish a portion of its reserves with this sale.

## **SCHOOL CAPACITY:**

### **What is the capacity of each of the schools that will remain beyond this year?**

Fort River can house 24 classrooms; Crocker Farm, 19; and Wildwood, 23. We anticipate needing 63 or 64 classrooms next year, and no more than that in the coming years since our population is expected to continue to decline.

## **NEXT STEPS:**

### **What will happen once the redistricting decision is made on October 27?**

While the focus of district staff has been on creating and analyzing possible redistricting scenarios, we have also been considering the ramifications of this decision. We have already begun work on the budget for FY11, and how we staff our buildings is a significant part of the budget; thus, our first priority once the redistricting decision is made will be to begin and complete a preliminary plan for staffing the remaining three buildings. The goal will be to provide adequate staffing of all types (special services, ELL, guidance counselors, etc.) to meet the needs of all kids in each building.

## **STAFFING RELOCATION:**

### **Will staff have any input into the staffing plan?**

Our work will begin next week by issuing a survey to all elementary staff about their location preference and their position preference if they are certified in more than one area. We will use the survey results to help inform our staffing work, however, we will balance the survey results with our need to demonstrate that our buildings are staffed as equally as possible in terms of degree level and years of service in our district. This is required due to our NCLB district rating. We also want to be sure that students being relocated from one school to another see familiar faces, not only in the classrooms, but in other areas of the buildings as well.

## **STUDENT RELOCATION:**

### **How will students be supported if they are transitioning to another school?**

As stated above, we expect students will already know many of the staff members in their new buildings. But we need to go well beyond this to be sure that students will quickly and, as painlessly as possible, be supported in other ways. A separate team of district staff will review student lists for each of the schools, identifying which of the students will be “new” to the school. This team will work together to make certain that all necessary supports are in place to best ensure each student’s success. This team will plan a variety of student activities including multiple student visits in the spring.

**FAMILY SUPPORT:**

**How will families be supported as a new school boundary is identified?**

Our transition team for family support will reach out to families to introduce them to their new home schools. We know that transportation may be an issue for some families, and we are working on how to lessen this possible burden including examining the cost of providing transportation to such families for school events, etc.