

January 19, 2010

Dear GMRS Superintendent and School Board,

On behalf of the Liberty Township Committee, we respectfully request that the Great Meadows Regional School Board suspends consideration of a vote to adopt the reorganization of the K-5 elementary schools affecting Central and Liberty Schools until more information and a more thorough analysis of the potential impact of such a decision is studied. In our observation, the three public presentations provided by the school board have fell far short in identifying the three public presentations provided by the school board have fell short in identifying the entire impact of such a decision. In private meetings and discussions with the superintendent, the Liberty Township Committee asked for much more detail related to the entire impact such a decision would have. To date, this information has not been received by our committee.

The School Board identified the original purpose for this discussion based on a current overcrowding condition in the Central School and a need to find a solution to remedy it. Based on the study performed by the School Board's consultant (VDY Consulting LLC) and their legal testimony during the proceedings to de-regionalize the school district, the Central School has a designed occupancy of 438 students; currently the school houses 390 students which means that the actual occupancy of the school is at 89% rather than the 148% depicted in the documents furnished at the School Board presentations. In meetings with the superintendent, the Liberty Township Committee contends that there is not an occupancy issue at Central School, rather a class size issue.

Based on the information furnished by the School Board to the general public, several parents and residents quickly identified two potential and viable solutions to remedy the problem:

1. Move the current 5<sup>th</sup> grade class up to the Middle School. To be fair, this suggestion was also presented by the School Board. The Middle School was originally constructed to house the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class. There is adequate separation from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade wing to the remainder of the building thereby solving the concern of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class being co-mingled with upper classmates. Some residents have even identified some perceived benefit in that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class could be introduced to, and transitioned to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade through a series of programs throughout the year providing a better transitional experience for the children.
2. The second alternative was to bring the class sizes in the Central School on par with the class sizes in the Liberty School. Based on the information furnished by the School Board, it is clear to even the most casual reader that several of the grades in the Central School enjoy much smaller class sizes than the same grade in the Liberty School. Both of these schools have class sizes lower than the states recommended class size.

The 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classes in the Central School enjoy average class sizes of 18, 16.5, and 17.5 students respectively. In the Liberty School these same grades average 22, 19, and 22 students respectively. Through elimination of a single class in each of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades at the Central School (going from 4 classes to 3), the class size would increase to 24, 22 and 23 students respectively placing these grade occupancies on par with the Liberty School. Further, three (3) classrooms would then be made available in the Central School to resolve the issue with classroom space. Art-on-a-cart could now become Art-in-the-classroom along with several other programs.

In consideration of these potential solutions, each of them would address the problem of class space in the Central School, each would provide for minimal disruption to the children, and each could be accomplished with little or no impact to the parents and residents of each township.

The School Board appears to have quickly dismissed the two suggested remedies above and instead moved on to a concept of integrating both schools and blending all of the classes; thereby suggesting a remedy that will displace and disrupt over 600 children as a solution to the issue. In our estimation, this plan's impact to the children is too great without further evaluation and study.

The Liberty Township Committee requested of the superintendent that a skeleton plan for transition be provided so that all of the pertinent issues could be identified with a short summary of their resolution and impact. Remarks from the superintendent and the board president from their last presentation stated that the plan outline has yet to be developed. The Liberty Township Committee believes it is ill fated to make a decision of such wide sweeping impact to our children without such a plan.

The outline plan should include as a minimum the following:

1. Both impact and benefit to the children. In the last presentation when the question of impact to the children was posed to the board by a parent, the response was "children will adapt". In our judgment this is not a suitable response. It seems obvious that whenever more than 600 children are disrupted or displaced, there will be widespread impact. What is the plan to address this impact? What is the plan to assist children having trouble adjusting or transitioning? Parent's involvement? Etc.
2. Impact to facilities. It is widely known that the septic system at the Liberty School has limitations. This too was testified to by the School Boards professional at the de-regionalization hearings. What impact will an increase in the student population at this school have on this system? At various presentations discussions regarding upgrading bathrooms to be more suitable for the new grade level occupancies would need to be done, changes to classrooms in furniture, chalk board height, etc. will need to be made. What is the cost and logistics of accomplishing all of these changes prior to blending of the schools?
3. Busing. The superintendent indicated that he received an email from the bus company indicating that they "did not foresee any increase in busing costs". Even to the most casual observer, changes to bus routes and wait times of the buses will undoubtedly have an associated cost and impact. It was presented that the additional time spent on the bus for children would not exceed 10 minutes, this seems overly optimistic.

4. Transitioning. Books, desks, learning material, individual teacher's materials, etc. all must be moved from one building to the other in preparation of this transition. Again, this appears to be a much larger task than can be accomplished by the local maintenance staff. Movers will need to be hired and someone brought in to oversee the entire process. Again, all with cost and logistical impact.
5. Budget. Clearly there appears to be a potential significant budget impact through implementing this School Board suggested school reorganization. The schools outline implementation plan should address budget impact and be prepared to dispel this as a concern.

While the Liberty Township Committee acknowledges that there may be some marginal benefit to have the children of the same grade collectively educated in the same facility, we are not convinced that the effort to achieve this limited benefit is worth the cost to the children, parents, and tax payers. The presentations by the school board clearly showed a benefit to the school administration but we submit such benefit is not adequate enough reason to disrupt the children.

As it relates to budget impact, Liberty and Independence Townships have not been immune to the downturn in the economy. With New Jersey's unemployment rate at nearly 10% (17% when considering those who have stopped looking for work) and a clear 2% higher than any one of our surrounding states, our township residents have felt this impact. Many are struggling to make ends meet and that has not gone un-noticed by the Liberty Township Committee. Therefore, a school board solution which will increase the school budget and thereby increase the tax burden of the residents should be avoided. Particularly when no or lower cost suitable options are available.

In consideration of the issues stated above, the Liberty Township Committee respectfully requests that you suspend a vote on this matter until a more thorough investigation into the various issues can be done and a skeleton implementation plan developed. In our observation, there are still a great number of open issues and questions related to this idea that have not yet been evaluated.

Respectfully,

John Fisher  
Mayor

Daniel Grover  
Committeeman