

There is a better plan for Eden Prairie

By Allyson Kaiser

COMMENTARY

Several weeks ago, I was part of a group of former Eden Prairie Schools Five-Year Facilities Task Force members who went public with our concerns of the proposed K-6 Transition and proposed boundary changes. While differences of opinion are to be expected when changes of this magnitude are considered, my concerns with moving to K-6 were that it doesn't equally distribute enrollment amongst available space, it requires unnecessary building alterations, increases the district's operating costs, and is disruptive to students. The plan is centered on incompatible objectives of balancing diversity while at the same time making student cohorts smaller and increasing enrollment at the least diverse school. It is much more convoluted than it needs to be to solve our problems and support student achievement.

The issues before us are simple. Our facilities are large in design resulting in operating efficiencies when they are at capacity. Due to a shift in demographics, our two southern elementary schools, Cedar Ridge and Eden Lake, are overcrowded and the two northern schools, Prairie View and Forest Hills, under utilized. Additionally, Oak Point was built to handle the enrollment peak and now has additional space. Eagle Heights Spanish Immersion, now in its sixth year, is being housed in

inadequate facilities, and has a split campus which transitions at fourth grade, which is inconsistent with the rest of the district.

In addition, the administration desires to better balance demographics amongst our schools and meet the demands for full-day kindergarten, preschool and Spanish Immersion. The current plan under consideration changes all schools to K-6, moves Eagle Heights to Oak Point and adds another elementary school. In addition, over 1,100 children will be moved to balance demographics. No exceptions will be made for any students including the 12 percent of our student population who have Individualized Education Plans. It will take several years for Oak Point to reach full capacity, meanwhile the four quadrant elementary schools would be bursting at the seams.

A better plan has been proposed to the board and administration that could achieve enrollment and demographic balance immediately, reduce operating costs, maintain current Oak Point programs by housing Spanish Immersion K-6 school in the Forest Hills building. The remaining three neighborhood elementary schools would become K-3 and Oak Point would house grades four to six. If student

transitions are a concern, the fourth-graders could "loop" to Oak Point with their third-grade teachers and class.

The benefits of this plan are many:

- The buildings would all be utilized for the grades that they were designed for eliminating the need for capital improvements.

- Moving the students from Forest Hills into the rest of the elementary schools would allow for a more natural balance of diversity as the result of a larger student draw. Schools would be 100 percent diverse by fourth grade.

- The Oak Point building would continue to provide the economies of scale at full capacity.

- Eagle Heights would be able to achieve a true immersion environment.

- Only two grades at Forest Hills would be moved to new schools – a fraction of the children who would be moved under the proposed boundary map.

- The capacity of Forest Hills can meet the historical demand of district families who desire Spanish Immersion.

- It eliminates the operating cost of one school instead of adding another.

The Forest Hills neighborhood would be disrupted and programs that are successfully supporting student achievement would need to be replicated in the other three elementary schools, however, the proposed

boundary map would spread them among four schools.

While change is necessary and there is no plan that will not negatively impact someone, minimizing disruption to students, uniting the community and operating as efficiently as possible should be a major consideration of the board and administration. There has been tension in the community surrounding our schools and resources for six years now and it is draining our district of its resources and civility. The plan on the table will only increase the divide and take more dollars out of the classrooms.

Over 1,500 Eden Prairie residents have signed a petition asking for a better plan. It will be presented at the School Board meeting on Dec. 21. It is time to put aside differences and self-interest for the sake of the children and the community. If you want a better plan, please sign the petition at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/epwantsabetterplan> and provide feedback to the School Board and administration. There is no reason that all students' needs can't be met and that we can't move our community forward in a way that is reasonable, fiscally responsible, and fair to all.

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