

# ELEMENTARY PARITY TASK FORCE

## INTRODUCTION

At the September 19, 2002 School Committee meeting, the Superintendent announced the formation of an Elementary Parity Task Force. The Task Force was formed to address parity concerns that surfaced as a result of the School Committee's adoption of a new grade configuration plan in the spring of 2002. As a result of this plan, the district will move from its current grade level schools to three grade 1-5 elementary schools with the future construction of a new elementary school. As part of this plan as well, students in grades pre-kindergarten through kindergarten would be educated at the Center School.

To accomplish its work, the Elementary Parity Task Force began meeting in the fall of 2002, and accepted as its charge the following:

- Delineate educational programs and services needed to provide an equivalent education in each school.
- Assess each school's physical plant and its ability to provide those programs and services.
- Review and highlight other physical plant needs related to the building envelope, architectural and building interiors, and other building systems.
- Review and highlight possible site improvements for each school related to signage, parking, recreation, and transportation.
- Identify mitigating factors that might impact parity initiatives at each school.
- Produce an informational report for the School Committee to use in its facilities planning and budgeting.

To complete its charge, the Task Force divided itself into two subcommittees: Physical Plant and Educational Programs and Services. During the conduct of their analyses, the subcommittees reviewed the Capital Asset Study completed in October 2000, the Long Range Facility Planning Report presented by NESDEC in November 2000, and the Feasibility Study completed by Design Partnership of Cambridge in the spring of 2002.

It should be noted that while the Physical Plant Subcommittee examined information relative to each school building, it did so through the eyes of teachers, administrators, and community members. The Task Force willingly stipulates that recommendations contained in existing reports come from trained professionals and should be followed. The Task Force also realizes that much of the highlighted work is targeted in the District's Facilities Plan that was adopted by the School Committee in the spring of 2002. It is not our intention to repeat information from existing studies. The report will amplify,

however, some of their recommendations, provide additional thoughts for consideration, and/or highlight physical plant changes at the Elmwood School and Hopkins School that are needed to provide parity with the new elementary school.

## **DEFINITION OF PARITY**

At its initial session, the Parity Task Force discussed the concept of parity and delineated from the group's perception what it means and what it doesn't mean. From these discussions, the Task Force reached consensus on the following operational definition of parity:

“Parity is defined as equal access to educational programs and comparable opportunities with regard to curricula, materials, staff, and facilities. Each building will support equivalent programs and curricula initiatives. The School Committee and administration will monitor student achievement among schools and make adjustments as needed to staffing, training, and resources”.

Embedded in this definition was an agreement that parity does not mean *exactly the same*. Through this set of lenses, the Task Force proceeded with its work.

## **ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the text that follows, the Task Force's findings are reported in seven key areas: regular education, special education, related arts, other instructional areas, staffing, school administration, and site/physical plant needs. In each area, both programmatic and physical plant issues will be discussed.

### **Regular Education**

The core educational experience for all students begins in the regular classroom program. To provide parity, students should experience similar teacher-student ratios and a positive learning environment. They should also receive equal access to curriculum and instruction programs, materials, and technology. Each of the aforementioned yields important considerations.

With the district's implementation of its curriculum cycle, each of the elementary schools should have equal representation on curriculum committees selecting new curriculum programs and equivalent resources for materials and teacher training to support their implementation. Students in each of the schools should also have equal access to programs that are grade specific. For example, students in each school should have access to Reading Recovery, an intensive program for grade 1 students that provides early reading intervention, other remedial reading and/or math services for grades 1-5, and, if applicable, the foreign language program currently offered in grade 5. Small group instruction rooms for each of these programs are also needed.

Instructional materials must also be a central concern as we transition to three district schools. Currently, teachers at the Hopkins, Elmwood, and Center Schools share materials within a grade primarily in social studies and science. With our new configuration, the same level of sharing will be difficult. Supplementary purchases of social studies and science materials will be needed as we transition.

Attention should also be paid across each school to resources for technology. Currently, for Internet access there are equal numbers of nodes between the Hopkins and Elmwood Schools. The number of live nodes, however, differs at the two schools due to the number of computers in each classroom. While Hopkins has three student computers per room, Elmwood currently has just two student computers per room. For data communication, the network at the Elmwood School has switch technology that allows transmission at 100 megabits per second. By comparison, the network at Hopkins operates at 10 megabits per second. To provide parity in these areas, additional computers are needed at Elmwood and additional network resources at Hopkins.

The Task Force recommends that there be sufficient access to televisions, DVD's, tape recorders, projection systems, and overhead projectors at both the Elmwood and Hopkins Schools. Currently, the level of access at Elmwood needs to be upgraded. While Hopkins has a television in every classroom, Elmwood teachers share a more limited number of televisions that are moved on carts. Recognizing the importance of all technologies to student learning, the Task Force certainly recommends that state-of-the-art technologies be included at the new elementary school. The Task Force also recommends that appropriate levels of technology be defined to avoid drawing parity dollars away from other important areas.

To assure consistency among the schools, time for teacher planning, discussion, and training will need to be purposefully designed to provide horizontal articulation within a grade level and vertical articulation across grades 1-5. Within the current grade structure, some of this horizontal communication naturally occurs. It is expected that vertical articulation will be enhanced by the new configuration. Sufficient space for teacher workrooms should be included in each school to facilitate these discussions; these rooms should also be equipped with equipment for photocopying, laminating, binding, and overhead production. The current teacher workroom at Elmwood is undersized.

To meet the challenges of the new grade configuration, the district will also have to maximize the use of contractual meeting time and teacher professional development days to meet the logistics of three schools and the need for both *within grade* and *across grade* professional development and curriculum planning.

Additional consideration must also be given to the physical learning environment of each school. At the Elmwood, Hopkins, and the new elementary school the general classrooms will contain sufficient square footage. While only the Hopkins School has the pod rooms for small group work, the use of these rooms varies within the school and will not be replicated in the other buildings. Sinks, however, should be included in the new

elementary school. If it were not cost prohibitive, a recommendation to add sinks at Hopkins would have been offered.

At the Elmwood School, however, many of the regular classrooms, particularly in the original section of the building, need a “fresh face.” Painting, the resurfacing of cabinetry and tack boards, and the replacement of chalkboards with magnetic white boards should be considered. Work is also needed on shelving and coat hooks to remedy damage caused by weights borne over the years. While all of the carpets have been cyclically replaced, a continued commitment is needed. A similar replacement cycle for classroom furniture should also be implemented.

### **Special Education**

For special education programs, spaces are needed to meet state and federal mandates. In each school, spaces need to be identified to accommodate increasing numbers of students, the need for therapies, an expanding severe disabilities population, and the return of out-of-district students to the district. These factors will increase the need for classroom-sized spaces, small group instructional spaces, team meeting rooms, offices, and records areas.

Incorporating additional special education spaces will also lead to physical plant considerations. Depending on the student population being serviced, consideration must be given to soundproofing, lighting, sinks, changing tables, carpeting versus VCT, and classroom storage space to remove distracting items. Installing one-way mirrors for specific classrooms and ensuring that doors for certain spaces have windows might also be necessary.

An equal distribution of students with disabilities should also be considered to provide parity among the three elementary schools. Where this situation is not financially viable, it is recommended that the severe disabilities programs be balanced among the schools.

**To accommodate these programs and the need for additional small group instructional space, potentially two regular classrooms at Elmwood will need to be converted to special education use. At Hopkins, one project room and one regular classroom may need to be similarly converted.**

In this discussion of parity, recommendations concerning programs and space will be continuously needed from Dr. Trudy Sack, the Director of Student Services.

### **Related Arts**

Just as with regular education and special education, the quality of the district’s related arts programs is partly dependent on the spaces provided for these programs. At the elementary level, related arts programs include art, music, and physical education/wellness..

For the art program, room size, lighting, flooring, deep sinks, art tables, shelving for poster boards, and storage space are important considerations and should be provided in

all schools. Currently, only the Hopkins School has a space that meets these specifications. At the Elmwood, such a space would need to be configured.

Music education raises challenges very similar to art education with acoustics replacing lighting as a major issue. Spaces need to be provided for both general music and instrumental music. Ideally, those spaces would be soundproofed and located in close proximity to the auditorium where concerts could be performed. Soundproofed practice rooms for instrumental music lessons and storage for instruments are also needed.

While Hopkins has the aforementioned spaces, Elmwood lacks practice rooms and storage space for musical instruments. If it is possible to create these spaces in a cost effective manner when the physical plant is reconfigured, the Task Force recommends doing so. The absence of this work, however, will not critically damage the music program. Decisions will also need to be made around school-wide concerts versus the current grade level concerts.

Physical education programs are to a degree defined by the physical aspects of the gymnasium, fields, and playground equipment. In the gymnasium at the Elmwood School, the current floor surface is very slippery and should be considered for replacement. New playground equipment will also have to be purchased. While the Hopkins playground equipment was designed for students age 5-12, the Elmwood equipment is not appropriate for this age span. A landscape architect should also be contracted to revisit the current play space at the Elmwood School.

In designing the physical education space at the new elementary school, a number of items should be considered. For student safety, windows and doors should not be placed behind the basketball backboards as was done at the Hopkins School and Elmwood School respectively. In addition, the gymnasium and public restrooms should be located in a manner that allows them to be secured from the remainder of the building. The location of the gymnasium at Hopkins does not afford this opportunity.

### **Other Instructional Spaces**

To provide parity among the elementary schools, comparable collections and spaces must be provided for the library media centers of each school. At each school, collections will need to accommodate a grade 1-5 population and should meet National Library Association guidelines of 22 books for each student. The design of the Hopkins Library should be the standard for both the Elmwood and new elementary school. It meets School Building Assistance Bureau standards, provides sufficient space for the library circulation area and library workroom, utilizes Winnebago circulation and cataloguing software, and incorporates technology for student research. To move beyond this standard at the new elementary school would draw parity dollars away from other needs.

The current library space at the Elmwood School is a prime parity target. The current space is undersized at 2,250 square feet and pales by comparison to Hopkins library, which contains 3,400 square feet. Because of its size, the Elmwood space can only accommodate one classroom at a time. The library also utilizes an outdated version of Alexandria software for circulation and cataloguing and lacks computer technology. The

Task force recommends the district look at expanding the library into the current computer lab. This expansion would increase the square footage of the room to approximately 3,000 square feet. In a related action, the district should consider a single rooftop air handler to serve this area. Two separate air handlers currently serve these spaces.

The computer lab in each school should also be looked at for parity in size and equipment. While the current computer lab at the Hopkins contains 1050 square feet, the lab at Elmwood is undersized at 730 square feet. With the recommendation to expand the Elmwood library into the current computer lab, the Task Force also recommends a concurrent move of the computer lab into room 7, an adjacent regular classroom that currently has a connecting door to the library. **This action would take an additional regular classroom off-line.** Computer labs in all school should be air-conditioned.

Each school should also have a comparable number of student stations. The 27 computer stations at the current Hopkins lab should serve as a standard. To ensure that the equipment in each school is functional, the replacement cycle outlined in the District Technology Plan should be followed. Currently, the equipment in the lab at the Hopkins School is slated for replacement. The current machines are the oldest in the district, lack storage space, and limit the amount of software that can be loaded for instructional use.

For the new school, the Task Force recommends that the layout of the computer lab should be given special attention. The design of the room should facilitate the teachers' ability to monitor students' work, should contain an office area for the technology teacher, and should consider the use of wireless technology in its planning.

### **Staffing**

The process for staffing each school will need to be carefully designed. Each school will require a balance of newer and experienced teachers who can teach all subjects at multiple grade levels to all students. This will require a very careful analysis of needs and staff. The staff assignment process will need to achieve this goal while giving careful consideration to teacher preferences and administrative preferences. This process will need to be very carefully designed with input from all constituencies.

The opening of a third grade 1-5 elementary school will also require staff increases in specialty positions. Each school now has a Guidance Counselor and a School Nurse. It is presumed that a new position for each area will be created with the opening of the new school. Each school will also need a Special Education Team Chair, a full-time Library/Media Specialist, a library assistant, and an instructional technology teacher. Although it is expected that the teacher/student ratios of therapists, School Psychologists and other specialists will not be diminished, it may be necessary to add additional positions to maintain actual ratios due to travel time between buildings.

## School Administration

For the purposes of this discussion, school administration refers to administrative staffing, secretarial support, nursing, guidance, and psychological services. To effectively manage a school, communicate with staff and parents, and address students' needs, parity is needed in both staffing and workspaces.

Administrative space at the Elmwood School is inadequate. The total square footage for administrative offices at the Elwood School is 925 square feet. By comparison, at the Hopkins School and the proposed elementary school the square footage is 1,574 and 1,670 respectively. Spaces for the Principal and secretarial staff, in particular, are insufficient and do not allow adequate space for waiting, storage, circulation, conferences, and copying. Guidance and the school psychologist spaces are similarly undersized; the psychologist is operating in a space formerly used as a closet. All administrative spaces should also be air-conditioned. As an additional concern, visitor access to the school cannot be effectively controlled with the current layout of the administrative offices.

To mitigate the issues cited above, the Parity Task Force recommends that existing space be reallocated for school administration. As part of this reallocation, consideration should also be given to the reconfiguration of the administrative offices and the front entrance. As one possible solution, the general secretarial area could be extended into the current Principal's office and a window installed to provide for the better screening and welcoming of visitors. In a related move, the Principal's office would need to be relocated. The most contiguous space would be the current nurse's office.

If the nurse's office is moved, changes should also be considered for this area. The nurse's office should be redesigned to incorporate privacy for conferences and phone calls, a handicapped accessible toilet room, sinks, and separate examination and rest areas. There should also be designated space for secure health records, a refrigerator, and locked cabinet for student medications and sharps.

Additional space is also needed for guidance and psychological services. This area should incorporate private office space for student consultations, meetings, and testing. It should also include larger frontal space that could be used for meetings and small group sessions with students.

To redesign the space for school administration, the services of an architect would prove valuable. **Based on the Task Force's analysis, two current regular classroom spaces could potentially be taken off-line from regular classroom use.** An architect, however, might suggest more viable, cost effective alternatives. Any reallocation of current classroom space would have to be considered in the district's facilities planning for a new elementary school.

## **Other Site and Physical Plant Needs**

As its organizing focus, the Subcommittee on Physical Plant referred to the Capital Asset Study and its categorical breakdown of a school into the five aforementioned areas: school site, building envelope, architectural and building interiors, mechanical systems, and electrical systems. While each area will be referred to in the text below, our primary foci were the school site and architectural and building interiors.

Essential to each school site are an effective transportation pattern, sufficient staff and community parking, school signage, and playfields. At both the Elmwood and Hopkins Schools, site constraints impede an optimal situation. Changes, however, can be made to improve conditions at both sites. At the new elementary school, careful planning should occur to mitigate many of the deficiencies experienced at our existing facilities.

Significant work is needed at the Elmwood School to improve the school site. Most problematic is a confusing traffic pattern. The school lacks a boulevard style entrance that facilitates separate and efficient parent and bus drop-offs. The school also lacks sufficient staff and community parking, which result in parking on field space and Elm Street and resulting problems with public safety and bus transportation. Play space and signage are also inadequate. It is our recommendation that a landscape engineer be hired to study the existing site, to explore Route 135 as a means of entrance and egress, and to make recommendations on playfields and parking.

While the Hopkins School does not present as many issues as the Elmwood site, improvements are still needed. The "S" curve that welcomes visitors to the building is difficult to navigate. With the implementation of the Loop Road as a result of the High School Project, the "S" curve is no longer needed and should be eliminated to improve easy access to the front of the school. Similarly, the old bus loop is no longer needed. It should be incorporated into the redesign of the transportation pattern and/or utilized to provide access to the teachers' parking lot. As additional site improvements, creating a rear access from the teachers' parking lot to the loop road and sidewalk repairs should be considered.

Critically important at our elementary schools as well is protecting the building envelope. The Elmwood School was originally constructed in 1965 and a thirteen-room expansion was added in 1989. In accordance with the Capital Asset Study, the masonry work needs inspection and should be repaired as needed. The roofing system must also be monitored and replaced after its life cycle. Of immediate concern at the Elmwood School is the needed replacement of the windows in the original building. Their replacement should result in energy efficiencies and long-term cost savings. Prior to any work beginning, the work should be submitted to the School Building Assistance Bureau as a major school repair, which makes the project eligible for state reimbursement. This submission is contingent on the current moratorium being lifted.

Each of the elementary schools should also offer an environment conducive to learning. As such, in each school attention must be paid to aesthetics, temperature controls, air

quality, accessibility, and programmatic needs. Periodic air quality testing should also be incorporated into the district's planning. For Architectural and Building Interiors, the Capital Asset Study recommends specific actions related to doors, ceiling tiles, floor tiles, toilet rooms, asbestos abatement, painting, lighting, and handicapped accessibility. These recommendations should likewise be implemented. As a final area for consideration, the Elmwood kitchen will also need attention. Most of its equipment dates from 1965 and will need eventual replacement.

## SUMMARY

For parity to be achieved among our elementary schools, continued attention must be given to instructional, site, and physical plant issues. The most critical variable in the parity process will be the relationship created between teachers and students in a classroom. Creating a balanced teaching staff at each school, providing them with the needed instructional tools, and giving them the time they need to plan will be critical as we move to district schools.

As indicated in the report, site and physical plant issues impact the learning environment for students. The recommendations in the Capital Asset Study and the district's Facilities Maintenance plan need to be followed. Given the competing need for Town Meeting Articles for a new elementary school, addressing the needs at Elmwood School and Hopkins School through the extraordinary maintenance budget should be considered. . Funding for these recommendations will present the biggest challenge. More than anything a commitment is needed. The district has already fallen behind the schedule of work recommended in the Capital Asset Study. The continued deferral of work will result in greater long-term capital costs for the Town.

Throughout the report, a number of recommendations have been made for the Elmwood School to improve special education, the library, the computer lab, and school administration. To implement these improvements as many as five regular education classrooms could be taken off-line. The services of an architect will be needed to verify this need. In any event, the district will need to factor this loss of regular classrooms into its space planning for the new elementary school.

As with any change of this magnitude, the move to district schools will need to be monitored closely over time. While the Task Force fully expects parity among our elementary schools, it is acknowledged that *parity does not mean exactly the same*. A need may exist for an extended day program in one school, for example, but not in another. The Task Force fully expects each school will develop its own identity over time. In doing so, it is likely that many of the traditions from our grade level schools will be sustained.

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