

NESHAMINY

Redistricting plan ready, waiting

If the proposal is put into action, most Neshaminy Middle School students will be heading to Maple Point.

By RACHEL CANELLI STAFF WRITER

Neshaminy Middle School students and teachers don't know yet if they'll be saying farewell to their neighborhood school and hello to a more distant one.

By state law, the Neshaminy school board can't decide until June whether or not to close the Middletown school, but officials say they have a redistricting plan ready anyway.

Neshaminy Middle, a national blue ribbon school located across from St. Mary Medical Center on Langhorne-Newtown Road, was scheduled to close in 2009 after high school renovations are completed and the ninth grade shifts there. But the school board chose to consider closing the school this year to address declining enrollment, budget issues and underutilized building space in the district, administrators said.

According to a facilities study, most of the district's buildings are anywhere from 16 percent to 40 percent under capacity, which means the structures are serving thousands fewer students than they could accommodate.

Only Neshaminy High School is being fully used, the study said.

The redistricting plan, which was crafted from census codes and geographic locations by a committee of 25 board members, administrators and parents, would move Neshaminy Middle's 600-plus pupils into two of the district's three middle schools, with the majority headed to Maple Point, said Superintendent Paul Kadri.

Although Neshaminy Middle's capacity could be roughly 1,000 students, according to the state Department of Education, its location makes it better suited to close and then lease or sell, officials previously said.

About 112 students would be transferred to Poquessing Middle School on Heights Lane. The Feasterville school's enrollment would increase to around 740 pupils. But that would be reduced to almost 530 kids once the ninthgraders move to the high school, he said.

The rest of the more than 400 Neshaminy Middle students would head to Maple Point on Langhorne-Yardley Road in Middletown. To make room for those kids, roughly 72 students would be transferred from Maple Point to Sandburg on Harmony Road in Middletown. That school's population would temporarily jump to more than 730, but it would decrease to less than 570 after the ninth-grade transition, officials said.

Parents previously expressed concerns because the temporary transfer would boost Maple Point's enrollment to more than 1,360 kids.

"The biggest hurdle will be Maple Point, because it will be tight for one year," Kadri said. "But our goals were to redistrict once, have minimal impact on student movement and provide equity of services for each building."

Neshaminy administrators pointed out the high number of kids would only be temporary. After ninth-graders move up to the high school, Maple Point's enrollment would drop to 947, officials said.

Assistant Superintendent Lou Muenker added that Maple Point's larger size should be able to handle the increased population, since it opened with 1,280 kids.

In the future, some Lower Southampton students who normally attended Neshaminy Middle would go to Poquessing, he said.

Officials said they also have homes for almost all of Neshaminy Middle's nearly 70 teachers.

Since more than 50 teachers are expected to retire this year, and another 20 educators anticipated doing so in January, the Middletown teachers can fill in many of those spots. Once ninth grade is located at the high school, some teachers would move there as well, depending on their certification and subject, administrators said.

Families will be notified of the possible changes through letters next week. At that time, the information should be posted on the district's Web site, officials said.

Building administrators are already working on ensuring a smooth transition by consulting with guidance counselors to set up orientation days and blending activities throughout the year, according to Muenker.

Even if Neshaminy Middle's closing is postponed until next year, administrators said redistricting would still be needed. Once the school is closed, it's not clear whether it would be sold or rented.

Built in 1965, Neshaminy Middle is also nationally recognized for its health initiatives, has 47 classrooms and 40 acres, officials said.

"I think we have a viable plan with the best interest of students and staff," said Muenker. "We understand that redistricting is a very tough, emotional subject because everyone loves their home school. But it's, unfortunately, necessary."

Administrators said they will continue to meet with parents, students and teachers to keep them updated and informed.