**Answers to Questions Raised by the Public
at the Special Board of Education Meeting
September 24, 2018 Hamden Middle School**

**The Hamden Board of Education and Hamden Public Schools administration are happy to provide answers to questions raised by the audience during the Public Comment section of the September 24, 2018 Board of Education Meeting.**

1. ***What’s the educational impact? How will these changes improve student learning?***

Research shows that educational outcomes are improved when students learn in diverse environments. Here are some quotes from the research on benefits of diverse learning environments:

* “A National Coalition on School Diversity analysis of literature finds no evidence that integrated schooling harms or decreases performance for any student demographic.”
* “Low income and disadvantaged minority youth demonstrate especially improved performance, but researchers find improvements in student performance regardless of a student’s race or socio-economic status.”
* “A meta-analysis of 59 studies found that mathematics outcomes are higher in racially and socioeconomically diverse schools across all grade levels, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds as compared to less diverse schools.”
* “Students in diverse classrooms demonstrate higher levels of engagement. Student experiences with diversity positively impact students’ problem-solving skills and their ability to work with others.”
* ”Elementary, middle and high school students in diverse schools demonstrate higher academic achievement than students in homogenous school environments. Studies show test scores increase in mathematics, science, language, and reading when they attend more diverse schools`.”
* “Early exposure to diversity prepares students to thrive in future diverse settings.”

Related to moving 6th grade to middle school, the Board feels strongly that this change will benefit students. Although there is mixed success with such moves in some school systems, when planned and implemented with careful attention to the needs of children of this age and in keeping with our current middle school “Team” model, the benefits can be significant. As answered in another question in this document, 6th grade in middle school will allow Hamden 6th graders world language and a greater amount of time and experiences in science and other subjects, comparable to what 6th graders in almost every other Connecticut school district receive .

In addition, restructuring will allow Hamden to realize cost efficiencies, and those savings can be reinvested into the school system to ensure maintenance of programs already enjoyed currently by students, such as AP courses, STEM programming, fine arts programming, world language programs, sports, clubs and activities, talented and gifted programs, and mental health supports.

 ***2. What happens to the teachers and administrators of a school that closes?***

Once a decision is made to close a school(s), the Superintendent, the Board of Education, and all impacted collective bargaining units will work collaboratively, using the language in each unit’s contract to determine reassignment.

1. ***Why assume 70% of WIMS students will return? What is the contingency plan if only 20-30% of students return to HPS from Wintergreen?***

The 70% figure seemed to be a reasonable return rate based on the experience of our consultants, who have faced similar situations in other districts. The Board has asked our demographic consultant firm to analyze this possibility and report back implications of a significantly smaller number of students returning to our district.

1. ***What will these changes/closures do to classroom sizes?***

There has always been variability of class size from year to year. More and more frequently, the district is in a position to determine whether or not to add a teacher when the number of students at a grade level at a particular school is large for one class but extremely small for two classes.

Because of declining enrollment, several of our schools are functioning considerably below capacity, resulting in extremely small class sizes in some cases. For example, a school with 27 second grade students requires two classes: one with 14 students and one with 13 students, since 27 children in one second grade class would be too many students. If, however, those 27 students were moved to another school with the same situation, the combined 54 students could be divided into three classes of 18 students each. These class sizes are still small, but savings are achieved by the need for one fewer teacher.

Current Hamden teacher contractual class size limits are generally limited to 20 students in grades K-3, and 25 students in grades 4-6. With restructuring, class sizes will not exceed contractual requirements and remain within a reasonable limit.

1. ***Will our school day be the same length if 6th grade moves to middle school next year? Will 6th graders still have recess? What about TAG for 6th grade?***

The school day length varies for elementary, middle and high school students. Exact hours are available on our Website. Sixth graders moved to the middle school would follow a middle school schedule. Specific decisions regarding the sixth grade schedule have not yet been determined. Decisions about how the TAG program will be provided have not yet been made.

1. ***How are you taking into consideration race when moving students? Why are no students being moved in or out of West Woods?***

The state of Connecticut defines diversity in a school district in terms of “white/non-white.” We recognize this definition is limited, but it is the standard by which the law measures our diversity and requires districts to diversify their schools. (The Board strives to achieve diversity in each elementary school to match the diversity of our entire population.) Our demographic consulting firm uses census and other data to determine how to segment neighborhoods to include a diverse student population in each of the scenarios. At the same time, they try to keep neighborhoods together, keep children relatively near their school and not create extremely long bus rides.

Based upon current scenarios, all schools will change attendance zones somewhat, though some more than others because of their current diversity, location, transportation and other related factors.

1. ***How will we make sure race/economics is equally redistricted?***

It will be impossible to ensure completely equal redistribution of students without creating dozens of small islands of attendance, long bus rides and increased transportation costs. The goal is to bring all schools closer to the “middle” in terms of their diversity status, without extremes at either end, while controlling yearly operating costs and maintaining our neighborhood schools.

1. ***Why is Hamden’s enrollment declining so greatly?***

Enrollment is declining across the State of Connecticut in almost every community.

1. ***Why aren’t we factoring existing grants into calculations? We should use them.***

The Board and administration have incorporated all existing grants into budgets and projections. Hamden Public School always pursues grant opportunities whenever possible, and has been quite successful in obtaining grant funds. Still, even with grant funds, the school district faces a shortfall nearly every year. While Hamden has been significantly underfunded through the state’s ECS formula for years (see www.hamden.org/ECS), additional state aid is expected to decrease in coming years, making the Town’s ability to support its school system even more challenging.

1. ***What about special education students? They need structures and routines, and we can’t move them around all the time.***

All the plans being discussed are designed to minimize disruption for our most affected special education students and are designed to improve the delivery of services for these students*.* In the past 5 years, several of our IIC special education classes have been moved frequently due to space issues in the schools in which they were placed.
A number of our special education students attend school at Alice Peck School, which needs significant facilities work in order to stay open. With grant funds, Alice Peck will undergo a large scale construction project that can be completed in a safer (particularly for medically fragile students) and faster manner without students occupying the building. Moving Alice Peck students to Wintergreen serves two purposes: 1) Requires only one move/minimal disruption and long term stability; and 2) allows for maximizing services to students and efficiencies by providing services in one location.

1. ***Where will 6-8 graders at WIMS go if we take Wintergreen back?***

The students who are Hamden residents will return to the school that provides an education for their grade level and attendance zone. If 6th grade remains in elementary schools, they will return to the school for their attendance zone. When 6th grade is moved to the middle school, all returning WIMS grade 6-8 students will go to the middle school.

1. ***All of these scenarios cost money – if we have no money why are we spending money?***

School buildings need maintenance – sometimes on a big scale. It’s important to understand that school buildings are funded through capital funds. A capital expenditure is money spent to acquire an asset that adds value to the municipality. In other words, capital expenses are investments. When a municipality buys a building or a piece of equipment, for example, that's a capital expenditure. In addition, these types of capital improvements are eligible for considerable state reimbursement (currently up to 67% reimbursement).

An operational expenditure, on the other hand, is money spent on day-to-day operations. Operational costs are allocated yearly, and are tied directly to the town mill rate. Capital costs are usually bonded or financed over time. By consolidating and upgrading schools, the district is expected to have lower costs for operational costs like utilities, personnel, transportation and rental fees. In addition, vacated buildings provide swing space for construction which would not only provide a safe environment for our students and staff during the building phase, but also allow construction to occur efficiently and without the need for portable classrooms or rental properties.

1. ***If you already have the grant to rebuild/refurbish Shepherd Glen, why not do it?***

The construction for Shepherd Glen may still happen, depending on which scenario is determined to be the most beneficial for our students.

A bit of background on recent school construction plans in Hamden may help community members deepen understanding on this topic: A feasibility study completed several years ago identified Alice Peck, Shepherd Glen and West Woods as in need of significant repairs. As a result, the School Building Committee was formed to explore options regarding the recommendations of the study. With guidance from the committee, the BOE made successful applications to reimburse much of the costs of facility improvements at Shepherd Glen and West Woods. (The program at Alice Peck will be changing, and different funding sources are being used to pay for those improvements to align with the new program requirements.) Construction projects at Shepherd Glen and West Woods are now being considered in the context of which restructuring scenarios provide the greatest long term gains, so for now, have been put on hold until restructuring decisions are finalized.

1. ***Why move 6th grade to middle school?***

Moving 6th graders to the middle school would allow them more opportunity to participate in classes that provide world language, STEM, Applied Arts, and higher level math. Middle school teachers specialize and teach only one subject, so they can focus their efforts on fully understanding and implementing the best practices in that subject. 6th grade is also at a time in a student’s education where the subjects get a lot more complex, so this specialization and deep teacher knowledge is particularly important. For these reasons, our elementary schools have “departmentalized” at the 6th grade level for the past few years.

Concerns have been noted that 6th graders may not be mature enough to move from teacher to teacher during a day. As noted previously, Hamden 6th graders in elementary schools move to different teachers for at least 2 subjects already. In addition, Hamden middle school uses a “Team” approach, which keeps students in smaller cohorts and with the same teachers and within the same section of the building for the majority of each day. This allows teachers to get to know each child on their teams and work together to maximize learning for every student.

Moving 6th grade to the middle school also allows us to achieve our diversity goal by allowing students to learn and interact with other children from all parts of Hamden one year earlier.

1. ***How will you accommodate specials at HMS?***

The Board has asked our consultants and administration to examine and report how the addition of 6th grade will impact “specials” like physical education, art and music, as well as the cafeteria lunch waves, and how to address the impact.

1. ***Will scenarios change again and when will decision be made (timeline)?***

It is possible that there will be some changes to the scenarios, but mostly in relation to exact attendance zones to improve diversity status. The Board chair also asked that one scenario not included previously but similar to the other three (Closing Shepherd Glen and Church Street) be explored by the consultants.

1. ***How will different scenarios save money and how will you solve the imbalance problem?***

The September 24 meeting was the Board’s and community’s first look at new scenarios. Details were provided in the presentations at this meeting about how the scenarios would impact diversity at each building, however Board members made requests to reexamine the issue to assure no schools were in impending imbalance. Detailed analyses of financial impacts will be presented at future meetings.

1. ***Will there be plans for social/emotional needs of children during transitions?***

To begin with, the Board of Education will make every effort to move as few students as possible while still achieving the goals of the initiative.

The Board members and administration are well aware that transitioning to a new school can be scary for students and their families, and that transition planning will need to take place. As is our practice with the existing transitions students face (transitioning from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school), we will plan activities, introduce “buddies” at the new school, enable visits and other strategies to help ease nerves and ensure students and parents feel comfortable and welcome in their new environments.

It should be noted that students who are relocated to “new” schools won’t be doing this alone – they will change schools along with other children they already know from their existing schools and neighborhoods.

It is clear however, that although only some children will change schools, all children will be affected in some way. The Board believes (and knows from research) that there are many advantages to students who live and learn in culturally, academically and socially diverse environments (some of these advantages are mentioned earlier in this document).

1. ***Is there a way to directly communicate with the Board and get questions answered?***

We have established an email address to which members of our community can communicate with our Board members. The address is BoardofEducation@hamden.org. Email addresses of specific Board members are included on our Website, under Board of Education / Members.

1. ***How much is ACES paying for Wintergreen School?***

ACES maintains the facility, but only pays the Town a nominal amount for use of the building or grounds. Hamden currently pays tuition costs of about $1.5 million per year to ACES for students to attend Wintergreen. Due to reductions in State funding to magnet schools, ACES tuition costs for its sending districts have increased to cover the shortfall.

1. ***Has construction to the middle school already been approved? Has there been an environmental study?***

No, this is something that will be pursued if the scenario determined to be most advantageous for our students includes moving 6th grade to the middle school.

1. ***What will happen to 6th grade teachers?******They aren’t certified to teach middle school.***

Teachers who are certified to teach grade six are allowed to teach one of the various content areas (i.e. Math, Social Studies, Science, Language Arts) to 6th grade students,
***if the 6th grade is moved to the middle school.***

1. ***Equal Opportunities Policy: Can we get copies of the reports on efforts to reduce racial isolation?***

The data reported to the state on how the district’s efforts to reduce racial, ethnic and economic diversity can be found in an annual report published by the Connecticut State Department of Education. The Profile and Performance Reports for all school districts are available at <http://edsight.ct.gov/SASPortal/main.do>. Unfortunately, the state is a few years behind in publishing these reports.

Years ago, when the law was written that required districts to report to their RESC (Regional Educational Service Centers – ours is ACES) about efforts to reduce racial isolation, funding was provided to the RESCs to create and implement programs with the purpose of reducing racial isolation. Hamden participated in many of these programs. Funding from the state has since been eliminated, and reporting on this important topic is now included in the Profile and Performance Reports referenced above.

Related to this topic and mentioned at the meeting was the need for a more diverse teaching staff. Although there is a shortage of minority candidates available, we want our community to know that Hamden Public Schools is actively working (in a variety of ways) to increase the diversity of our teaching staff.