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Crowded classes may prompt hiring at Jackson St. School

By CATHERINE BAUM
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NORTHAMPTON - Faced with two large second-grade classrooms, Jackson Street School officials are considering hiring a new teacher.

Jackson Street School parent Kim Mahoney, of 345 Elm Street, told the School Committee last week that classes of 25 and 26 students each are unmanageable. She said unsafe conflicts are escalating and attention given students is disproportionate, with teachers focusing on students who have behavior issues.

Students, Mahoney added, are frustrated and upset over the situation, which resulted from an unexpected enrollment increase.

"It's crazy in the classrooms," Mahoney said. "How bad does the situation have to become before another teacher or a teacher's aide can be added to the school?"

Principal Gwen Agna, Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez and School Business Manager Susan Wright will meet today to discuss whether the district can afford to hire a third second-grade teacher.

A survey went out to Jackson Street School parents over the weekend. Parents are relieved the district is considering the change, Agna said, and no parents oppose it.

Mayor Clare Higgins supports the move. She said failing to make it would be "short-term savings for a long-term cost." A teacher's salary is about \$48,000, Wright noted.

"I don't think we've seen too many 25, 26 (student) classes in the younger grades," Higgins said. "I feel like this is something we really need to try to figure out and figure out quickly."

Further, the second grade class is "particularly needy," Agna said, in terms of the number of special education students and students who have emotional and behavioral issues or come from poor homes. Of the combined 51 students, 32 are boys and 19 are girls.

"It's an interesting imbalance for sure," said Agna, who noted this is her first request for an additional teacher in her 14 years in the school district. "It's not just the numbers, but the needs of students."

On the table now is the decision to hire a classroom teacher or teacher's aides. School Committee member Michael Flynn, a teacher at the William E. Norris Elementary School in Southampton, prefers a third teacher.

"Having a smaller classroom with a certified teacher trained in all the areas I think is ideal," Flynn said.

School officials expressed concerns about hiring a teacher given the city's limited budget, but acknowledged the importance of doing so. Rodriguez said the hire could be risky because the district anticipates midyear cuts to local aid.

"I recognize that with potential ... cuts I'm not sure I can even squeeze the funding out of this budget and I know it won't be sustainable for next year," Rodriguez said.

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"I think we're looking at midyear cuts but I guess we'll have to cross that bridge when we get to it," Higgins said. "And let's be honest, most of the midyear cuts come from the municipal side, not the school side" of the budget.

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