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New try on vision

Northampton plans to take new look at future of schools

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NORTHAMPTON - School officials and administrators will steer clear of historically hot-button money-saving proposals - like closing a school or limiting school bus transportation - and instead focus on the long-term sustainability of Northampton schools at 6 tonight at the JFK Middle School.

"I think the whole financial picture derailed the group," said Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez, referring to cost-savings ideas on the table before Northampton voters approved a Proposition 2½ override that gave an additional \$1 million to city schools.

The administrators and School Committee in a joint public meeting will come up with a name for the new committee, determine who is eligible to serve on the panel and set how many people should be on it. During discussions on whether or not to close a school to save money, school officials said the broader question became how to use the buildings available to best serve students.

"The goal isn't should we or should we not be closing a school, but what do we want for the Northampton public schools," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez said the panel will need to look in depth at how the district will fund itself and what it wants to be in the future. School Committee vice-chairwoman Stephanie Pick will lead the brainstorming tonight. The charge of the committee is to look at how city schools will support the improvement of student performance, control expenses and seek new revenues.

In terms of membership, the committee will be different from the Strategic Planning Committee that was created last August. That committee - consisting of teachers, parents, city councilors, community members and school officials appointed by Mayor Clare Higgins - was restricted to two school administrators and discussed "such huge things" as putting kindergarten through eighth-grade students in one building, Rodriguez said.

Those conversations should include all principals, she added.

"The Strategic Planning Committee had an even broader look at the district and tackled more topics. It was more of a Northampton community kind of a committee," said Pick. "This committee is really specific about the schools and education in the schools. This will be more heavily populated with the people who are doing the work of education."

Rodriguez said the Strategic Planning Committee report released in January was "wishy-washy," lacking specific suggestions about the thorny issue of whether or not to close a school.

The report did find Northampton students outperform students in seven compared schools in SAT scores, while they rank second in that group in MCAS scores. Also notable: Of those schools, the city came out the second highest in special education enrollment but the second lowest in special education funding.

"We've done phenomenal things with very little," said Rodriguez. "I think we should be able to market that."

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School Choice

Rodriguez supports the Strategic Planning Committee report's recommendation to expand the number of seats available for out-of-district School Choice students. The district has a waiting list for School Choice candidates, she noted. Each School Choice student brings \$5,500 to the district, with current revenues of about \$1.2 million.

Rodriguez said some School Committee members are reluctant to expand the number of choice-in students because the move creates larger class sizes and, eventually, a need for more teachers.

"It's a risk but it's a very good chance we'll bring in enough money to be able to fund that teacher," Rodriguez said. "We're a public school district and we're here to make money. If we're here to only educate Northampton kids you then need to look at how much does it cost to educate Northampton kids."

The committee being formed tonight is set to address School Choice, among other revenue opportunities.

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