

November 7, 2006

Dear Parents and Community Members:

This week my update is primarily for the parents and community members who are concerned about the Region 14 reconfiguration process. You present reasoned voices. You are genuinely concerned that the region's reconfiguration will interfere with the education of our children and the quality and character of the community.

First, I know you share a belief with me that all reasonable conversations have to be based on fact. We also know that even the most well thought out plans for changes can generate confusion and anger because rumor and speculation are perceived as fact over time. But rumor and speculation also mislead and confuse people.

Consequently, I have compiled a list of important, basic facts about the Region 14 reconfiguration. The list addresses several rumors and assertions that cloud our discussions about our schools.

After you have read this information, please remember that I am very available to answer your questions and to talk and think with you about your concerns. My email is rcronin@ctreg14.org and my telephone number is 263 4339. I return all calls that come in for me and I respond individually to each email I receive. I want to know what you are thinking so that we can move forward with what you expect from the schools and me for our students: the best education possible.

Please note that the next Board of Education meeting has been rescheduled to Monday, November 13, 2006, at 7:30 PM in the Nonnewaug High School library.

Facts about the Reconfiguration v concerns and assertions

Fact:

Teachers who share a well defined, focused mission can concentrate on the needs of their students more fully than their colleagues whose responsibilities are more broadly defined. With fewer grade levels, the discussions among professionals become more productive.

Fact:

The fifth grade classes currently housed at the middle school will return to an elementary school. Members of both Woodbury and Bethlehem identified this as a top priority.

Fact:

When there are more teachers at each grade level, there is a greater possibility a student's learning style can be more closely matched to a teacher whose teaching style is best for the child.

Fact:

Professional development has to be relevant to teachers and specific to the needs of the children. This has become an increasingly high priority for the board and the administration.

Fact:

The reconfiguration will enable administrators to be more effective with their responsibilities for supervision and evaluation. We know that the best instructional strategies or methods for teachers working with very young children differ considerably from the methods used with fifth graders. With fewer grades to supervise, administrators will have an opportunity to develop a more focused, effective set of skills for supervision and evaluation.

Fact:

The educational literature suggests that schools that have adopted a K-2 configuration tend to have fewer students who need reading assistance and special education services.

Fact:

Changes are difficult for many children. Progressing from first to second grade can generate anxiety for some children even if the new classroom is just across the hall or on the next floor. It is our responsibility as parents, teachers, and administrators to help children to learn how to tolerate changes in their lives. In regard to the reconfiguration, it is helpful that all children in the third grade will be making transitions together.

Fact:

In planning for the transition, the board and administration are planning activities that will help children and their parents to get to know their new teachers better than they are able to now.

Fact:

The new grade configurations will increase opportunities for enrichment and remedial help. For example, the second grade teachers and their principal may decide they want to work differently on a specific topic with a small group of students. Or one teacher might agree to help a group of students work on a particularly challenging topic from which they would benefit greatly. Another teacher might be able to focus on an area in which several students from different classes need remedial help or more reinforcement. This is called flexible grouping. It is an especially useful teaching method that is particularly amenable to the reconfiguration since the more teachers there are at a specific grade level, the easier it is to form smaller groups based on student need.

Fact:

Reconfiguration will strengthen the libraries in both of the schools because the librarians will purchase materials for children within a narrower grade span. Further, purchasing supplemental materials for fewer grades allows them to purchase more.

Fact:

Region 14 students at all grade levels will benefit from the investment Woodbury and Bethlehem will make to all of the schools. This will reduce competition among the schools for resources. It is also reasonable to expect other opportunities will arise that will benefit all students.

Facts about transportation v concerns and assertions

- No definitive school start times have been established yet. This will depend on bus routes.
- Routes for students attending Mitchell School in the fall will be completed by mid-January, 2007. Routes for Bethlehem will be ready by mid-April. Bethlehem's delay is because of the registration of the new kindergarten class that will be held in January, 2007.
- At the present time, the district transports elementary special education students daily from Bethlehem to school in Woodbury.
- Presently, some students in Bethlehem and Woodbury spend over 45 minutes on a bus. We all agree that this is not best for children. With the reconfiguration, there will be more buses available for children because Mitchell and Bethlehem schools will start at different times, allowing 18 buses for each school. The outcome is that travel time will be reduced because there will be more buses, many with shorter runs picking up fewer children.
- Students will not ride buses with children who are more than two years older than they are.

Finally, we all need to recognize that there is no guarantee that another referendum will pass. As I indicated on last week's timeline, I will ask the Board of Education to consider a revised renovation project at Mitchell School. Given past practice in the district regarding the previous referendum to purchase land in 2004 and to renovate Mitchell to new in 2006, the possibility is not promising. I must plan for the district as if there were not going to be any changes in the facilities in the near future.

I hope this letter provides you with useful information. I will be adding updates every Monday. Next week, I will outline transition ideas and plans for students and parents.

Sincerely,

Robert D. Cronin, Ph.D.
Superintendent, Regional School District No. 14