

**Statement by the Port Angeles School District Board of Directors
Regarding the Proposal for Closure of
Monroe Elementary School**

Introduction

At the meeting of the Port Angeles School Board on Monday, March 8, 2004, the recommendation was made to propose the closure of Monroe Elementary School at the end of the 2003-04 school year. Thus begins the 90-day period for consideration of this recommendation before the board makes a final decision on June 14, 2004. Public hearings on the proposed closure of Monroe Elementary School are scheduled for Tuesday, April 6, 2004, and Thursday, April 22, 2004. These hearings will begin at 6:30 p.m. in the gymnasium of Jefferson Elementary School.

Emotions run high when faced with closure of an elementary school beloved by the students, staff and families. Monroe is a particularly difficult and poignant choice given the strength of the staff, a gifted administrator and the vulnerability of some of the student population.

The members of the School Board understand the feelings of grief and anger. We ask for understanding of the sensitivity of the staff and families as they look to joining other school communities in the district. Together, we hope our district will unite in welcoming the staff, students and families of Monroe Elementary School and by doing everything we can to prepare for a smooth and successful transition if the proposal goes forward. We believe our children will respond well to the change if parents and district staff demonstrate a positive attitude as they prepare for the changes that may come in the 2004-05 school year.

Brief Chronology and Review of Process

Closure of an elementary school has been under consideration by the school district for several years as we faced declining enrollments and painful budget cuts.

- Over two years ago, the Budget Review Committee formed by the Port Angeles School Board, recommended that the board study closing an elementary school in its report of February 11, 2002. Monroe Elementary School was identified as a possible school for closure.
- The successor committee, the Fiscal Advisory Task Force, followed up by recommending the formation of a task force to study the efficiency of the number of elementary schools in the district.
- Subsequently, the Facilities Efficiency Task Force, beginning in October 2003, studied the efficiency of facilities in the district. In its report to the board on January 26, 2004, the Task Force provided nine options for the board to consider, including doing nothing, and ranked them from most to least favored.

- School board members and the superintendent met with parent groups at Monroe and Franklin before the next school board meeting.
- The school board meeting on February 9, 2004, was preceded by a board study session held with members of the Facilities Efficiency Task Force.
- A community forum followed the study session on February 12, 2004, at Port Angeles High School, which was attended by more than one hundred interested community members.
- A second board study session occurred at Franklin Elementary School on February 23, 2003. At this session, the board reached a consensus to close an elementary school at the end of the 2003-2004 school year. The choices were narrowed to closure of either Fairview or Monroe Elementary School. Seven of the nine options were eliminated for the principle reasons that they disrupted too many students, failed to reduce the number of elementary schools in the district, did not realize the cost savings needed, or took place over a protracted period of time.
- School board members attended parent meetings held by the superintendent on March 2, 2004, at Fairview Elementary School and on March 4, 2004, at Monroe Elementary School.
- Throughout this process, school board members received and read scores of letters, e-mails, and comments from parents, staff, and interested community members expressing their views on school closure.
- Finally, at the school board meeting on March 8, 2004, the board of directors voted to propose closure of Monroe Elementary School at the end of the 2003-2004 school year.

Information Provided by District Staff

At the request of the school directors, the superintendent and his staff were requested to provide information on the following concerns:

- **Boundaries.** Boundaries would change for 205 students if Monroe were closed. Most students would transfer to Fairview or Franklin. Boundaries would change for 259 students if Fairview were closed, with all Fairview students transferring to Monroe and some Monroe students moving to Franklin.
- **Anticipated Savings.** The anticipated cost savings to be realized by the district is estimated to be \$378,392 with either the closure of Fairview or Monroe Elementary Schools.
- **Class Size.** No significant difference in average class size was anticipated if either Fairview or Monroe were to close. Current student-teacher ratios are 21.60 at Fairview and 18.04 at Monroe. Closure of an elementary school would result in average class

sizes between 20 and 22 students. Average class size would be somewhat higher if Fairview remains a two-unit school. Data suggests that closure of an elementary school would help to balance out class size throughout the district.

- **Impact on Special Education Programs.** Closure of either Fairview or Monroe would likely require the installation of portables to handle the increased number of students and to accommodate the classroom needs of students receiving special services. The likelihood of using portables to house regular classrooms rather than specialists and their programs is greater at Fairview than Monroe. Staff expressed confidence that facility alterations can be completed prior to the opening of school in 2004-2005 at an estimated cost of from \$5,000 to \$7,000.
- **Loss of certificated and classified staff positions.** Either option will result in reducing one principal position, 2.5 to three teacher positions, one secretary position, and 1.5 custodian positions (12 hours). Reduction in teaching staff will probably occur through retirement or resignation rather than lay-offs.
- **All-day kindergarten.** The district does not currently offer, nor is there money in the district budget at this time, to provide district-wide all-day kindergarten. (Dry Creek and Jefferson schools do offer extended learning opportunities for selected children needing additional help acquiring needed skills.) If the district were to change to an all-day kindergarten, neither option offers a sufficient number of classrooms to implement all-day kindergarten without the addition of portables.
- **Portables.** Fairview can operate as a two-unit school without portable classrooms, but would need a portable to accommodate specialists, at the estimated cost of \$41,100. As a three-unit school, Fairview would need three portables at a cost of \$99,900. Monroe would require the addition of two portables at the estimated cost of \$63,650 to absorb the addition of students from Fairview.
- **Specialists.** Fairview as a two-unit school is less able to accommodate specialists (office space and areas for student activities) than is Monroe as a three-unit school.
- **Emergency services.** No significant difference in response time was noted with either option.
- **Transportation.** Transportation costs increases are generally anticipated to be between \$35,000 - \$48,000 if Fairview is closed or becomes a three-unit school. If Fairview remains a two-unit school cost will increase to \$78,000. The length of time on buses will increase (though remain under an hour) for Monroe students traveling to and from Fairview.
- **Cost of Mothballing.** Monroe is slightly more expensive to maintain as an unoccupied property (\$613 per month) when compared to Fairview (\$448 per month).

- **Out of Attendance Area Patterns.** Approximately 20 percent of both Monroe and Fairview student bodies come from out of their attendance areas. Fairview and Monroe both experience the highest percentage of within area attendance of the six elementary schools in the district. Twenty-six students from Fairview live outside of district boundaries, in contrast to five Monroe students. A telephone survey of families from Fairview and Monroe living out of the district indicated that 78 percent of Fairview Elementary School students would move back to the Sequim School District if Fairview were to close. This was true for only one Monroe family surveyed. (It should also be noted that at the parent meeting at Fairview, attended by school directors Hinds and McLaughlin, approximately 40 parents indicated by a show of hands that they would withdraw their children from the district if Fairview were to close.)
- **Request process to enroll in school outside attendance area.** The district has an open enrollment policy dependent upon space availability in out of attendance area schools. If the bulk of students do not shift to the new school of residence, re-boundary efforts will not be successful in balancing enrollment and reducing staff costs.
- **Rental value of each facility.** Based on a low rate of 25 cents per square foot per month, Monroe has a rental value of \$120,309 per year and Fairview has a rental value of \$78,036 per year. Olympic Christian School has expressed an interest in renting Fairview for a minimum of five years. No interest has been expressed yet in rental of the Monroe property. However, the Facilities Efficiency Task Force did consider Monroe as a possible future location for the Central Services Office.

After thoroughly considering the new information provided in the School Closure Report, each school director gave a summation of his or her findings and preference. The final consensus of the Port Angeles School District Board of Directors in a 4-1 vote* was to propose closure of Monroe Elementary School at the end of the 2003-2004 school year. The recommendation was based principally on two factors:

- (1) The need to maintain geographic balance and to retain an elementary school in the east end of the district; and
- (2) The desire to disrupt the fewest number of students.

Other factors cited by school board directors were (a) the potential traffic and safety problems presented if Fairview students moved to Monroe Elementary School; (b) the risk of loss of a significant number of students to the Sequim School District, private schools, and home schooling if Fairview were to close; (c) the unique attributes of Fairview's rural setting; and (d) the importance of continuing the three-year pilot Continuous Quality Improvement program being implemented at the district's only elementary school.

While electing to keep Fairview open, the board acknowledged it was a difficult and narrow decision. Factors considered by the board in favor of keeping Monroe Elementary School open were (1) considerably more square footage, classrooms, storage space, and activity areas for music, physical education and other activities available in Monroe's larger facility; (2) Monroe's

exceptional special education programs and services developed over the years and the school's embracing of mainstreaming efforts for all students; and (3) the greater challenge posed for special needs students to adjust to a new school.

Conclusion

The decision to recommend closure of an elementary school is a wrenching experience for everyone. While the administration was asked to provide information, the ultimate responsibility for the decision to close a school rests entirely with the elected School Board members, who are accountable to the voters. The school board is optimistic that enrollment in the Port Angeles School District will increase in the next five to ten years and that a renovated Monroe Elementary School will some day reopen.

The somber meeting ended with some words of wisdom from the youngest member of the school board – Student Representative Adrianna Marcial. While concurring with the decision of the members of the school board to propose closure of Monroe, she observed that everyone in the Vern Burton gymnasium was there because they care about children. Participants in the process had demonstrated a dedication to their children by coming to the meeting and staying until 10:30 p.m. on a Monday night while their children were at home asleep preparing for school the next morning. Ms. Marcial expressed her belief that our community will stay together and will pull together to weather this difficult but necessary change.

* Director Cindy Kelly voted against the proposed closure of Monroe Elementary School.

Adopted: 03/22/04