

What the CAC Was Told

After eliminating other options, the Community Advisory Committee was tasked with advising the Lower Merion school board on building one school versus two. There were three key pieces of information given to the CAC that proved key in the CAC's recommendation to build two schools in lieu of one. All three were untrue!

Minimum Required Land Size

In the June 2006 edition of the District Digest, Superintendent Savedoff states that: "*The Pennsylvania Dept. of Education's guidelines for new high school construction require an initial 35 acres + 1 additional acre for every 100 students. In order to construct a single school of suitable size for all LMSD students (combining Harriton and Lower Merion High school populations), the District would need a property totaling 61 acres (35 acres + 26 acres to accommodate the projected enrollment of 2600 students at the high schools). Harriton, the larger of the two current high school sites, has a total area of only 50 acres. The District could acquire additional property through eminent domain, but the costs and potential delays could be prohibitive.*"

But, while this may sound compelling, it is simply not true. The PA Dept. of Ed. has only one such regulation, but it actually says the opposite. Specifically, Chapter 349.7 of the PDE School Building Standards, entitled *Approval of Sites*, states: "(a) *Approvable size. Usable acreage as follows shall be considered optimum: elementary schools—10 acres; schools for middle grades—20 acres, schools for high school grades—35 acres*" and the regulation goes on to state two conditions as follows: "(1) *In general, maximum approvable site sizes shall be the stated optimum, plus one acre for each 100 full-time equivalent students in projected enrollment. (2) Minimum approvable site sizes shall consider factors related to land availability, proximate shared use land, and other reasonable considerations.*"

The fact is that what the Superintendent states in the Digest as a "PDE required" minimum property size is actually the maximum property size as far as the PDE is concerned. Both the board president Larry Rosenwald and the Superintendent have referred to this misstatement of the regulation publicly and both have been unable to state the name of site of the regulation when asked about it.

The real impropriety here is that this same misinformation was given to the CAC. Page 28 of the CAC report states: "*The following regulatory and logistical criteria were heavily factored in the evaluation process of each of these [school construction] options:*

- *The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has guidelines for minimum ratios of student population to school-site size. For example, for a student population of 2,500, the PDE recommends a minimum site size of 60 acres.*

So it's no surprise that the report cites this as the "most compelling" reason to abandon the single high school option, citing this "fact" no less than six times throughout the report.

Construction Cost Estimates

The CAC was given an estimated cost for the construction of one new high school of \$130,875,791 and an estimate of \$151,853,841 for the combined cost of two new schools. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of construction would tell you that the actual differential would be significantly higher. But, based on a cost differential of a mere \$21 million, why would the CAC have come to any conclusion other than to build two schools? Unless of course they considered the significantly higher operating costs of two schools versus one (see below!).

Incidentally, the CAC report defined the \$150M amount for the construction of two new schools as a rough estimate for comparison purposes that included "professional fees, testing and inspections, and temporary facilities, as well as furnishings, and fixtures, and equipment," plus a 5% contingency. However, Superintendent Savedoff now tells us during his June 19th presentation that "it was beyond the scope of the CAC to look at design and logistics of construction." For example, he now says that the CAC did not consider "the temporary gymnasium & lockers, the temporary parking, the modular classrooms." Somehow these do not fall under what he meant when he told the CAC that "professional fees" and "temporary facilities" were in the \$150M.

But the superintendent is searching to explain why the \$151 million estimate is currently at \$238 million, and he is grasping at straws, including blaming anyone that questions the process as causing costly delays due to inflation!

What he has not addressed is why the size of the schools has increased so much and what affect this has had on the cost. The CAC was told that the two new schools would be 588,616 square feet, combined. Dr. Savedoff now tells us they are being designed for a total square footage of 666,000. Why have they gotten so large?

The CAC report also considers the need for a 2500-student school size even though the report projects the high school population to peak at 2517 students in 2006-07 and taper off to about 2200 students after 2010 (about the year the high schools are projected to be complete). But that's changed too! The new budget report uses higher numbers that stay in the 2500 range. (See the www.lmsd.info link to LMSD Versus PDE Enrollment Projections in the *review the facts* section of the website.)

Operating Cost Estimates

The CAC was given an estimated operating cost for one new high school of \$28,666,298 and an estimate of \$32,396,151 to operate two new schools. In other words, the Board told the CAC it would only cost an additional \$3.7 million per year to operate two schools in lieu of one. How can this differential be so small? The board explained this by showing that it would need nearly the same number of staff regardless of the number of schools.

For example, the CAC was told that one school would require:

- three professional staff members less than the two existing schools,
- seven vice principals compared to the eight required for the two new schools (that's one vice principal for every 300 students, plus two principals!),
- more than one athletic director (While two are needed for two schools, one at a salary of \$86,600 would not be sufficient for the one high school option),
- three less aides, the same number of campus aides, the same number of clerical personnel, and only four less custodians than two new schools.

In other words, the one school option would only allow for a savings in staffing of 25.78 positions (306.08 v. 280.3). If the CAC had been given a realistic view of the economies of running one school in lieu of two, perhaps they would have actually considered two schools (except for the fact that they were told the PDE considered the sites too small!)

How Do You View The Facts?

Read the CAC report for yourself. Investigate the facts for yourself. Do you believe that lies about State regulations, artificially contrived construction cost estimates, and staffing projections that hide the economy of operating one school in lieu of two are a credible basis for a community study? The public is not so easily fooled!

PS: The board has said that the CAC determined that the costs to renovate the two existing schools exceeded the cost to build new. The CAC did no such thing. The CAC was told that it would cost \$175 million to renovate both schools and that it would cost \$150 million to build new. The board now say its \$238 million to build new. It's no wonder that renovation was not an option for the CAC. But knowing what we know now, should it have been?