

Summary of Nelson School Forum November 13, 2010

The Forum was facilitated by Lizann Peyton, an independent consultant from Norwich, VT who also facilitated the Harrisville School Forum in November 2009. Break-out group facilitators were Rick Church, Maury Collins, Mike Cornog, Susan Peery, Betsy Street, and Pamela White. The forum was an information gathering and sharing session, intended to gather public input. No decisions were made at the forum. This summary is a compilation of what was on the minds of the people who participated.

Purpose and Goals of Today's Forum:

- To gain a shared picture of the strengths of our school and enrollment trends
- To generate broad, creative ideas for responding to declining enrollment
- To prioritize areas we'd like the Nelson School Board to investigate further

Primary Emerging Ideas:

1. Do not leap to closing the Nelson School or merging with another school at this time. Build a 5-year plan that provides a firmer footing for parents, teachers, and prospective newcomers. In the meantime, seek additional opportunities to manage costs, acknowledging that the tax burden of the school is a community concern.
2. Investigate the advantages, disadvantages, and feasibility of ideas ranging from adding a public pre-K program, reconfiguring schools with Harrisville, expanding use of the facility for other community needs, integrating elder programs into the school, and marketing the town and school to younger families.
3. Assess "how small is too small" – academically, socially, and fiscally. Is there an enrollment level below which the school cannot meet children's needs well? How can the town best balance its educational values with fiscal and tax accountability?

Overview of Enrollment Trends:

SAU 22 Superintendent Wayne Woolridge confirmed that school population has declined substantially, not only in Nelson but in other Monadnock region schools. The SAU as a whole has 18% fewer students than 10 years ago. Some schools dropped more than 30%, and the largest decline appeared in the smallest communities (Nelson, Harrisville, and Marlow). This tracks the overall "graying" of New Hampshire: The state's proportion of school-age children is 3% below the national average, while the percentage of residents over 65 is expected to double by 2030.

Small schools face even more pressures. Changes in school funding formulas hit small schools hard, and they have less flexibility to combine grades under No Child Left Behind's strict requirements for mastery of content by grade-level. Despite these pressures, Nelson should feel proud of its status as a high-performing school. It rates first in the district for math and reading scores, and low in bullying incidents. Nelson students have high attendance rates at Keene High

School, and both the Middle and High schools report that Nelson students are well prepared for these higher grades.

SAU Business Manager Tim Ruehr reviewed trends in enrollment history at the Nelson School:

School years 1998-99 through 2006-07	Student enrollment averaged in the mid-50s to upper-60s
2007 – 08	42 children
2008 – 09	36 children
2009 – 10	34 children
2010 – 11	25 children

Tim also summarized school budget figures. Nelson’s annual school costs, pre-K through high school, are just under \$1.8 million and of that total, roughly \$850,000 is for the Nelson School (K-6). As enrollment numbers decline and that fixed cost is divided among fewer and fewer students, the cost-per-pupil does rise dramatically. But Tim cautioned that increased cost-per-pupil does not in itself mean an increased cost to taxpayers. The school’s fixed costs, no matter how many or few students attend, are what taxpayers must fund. Adding students to the school, particularly if it requires hiring more staff, would in fact increase the tax burden even though per-pupil-cost would appear lower.

Sheila Vara, Nelson School Principal, introduced herself to the audience and expressed great thanks for the strong turnout by residents. She and the school staff are open to new ideas, committed to providing the best for Nelson’s children, and eager to hear from the community. Those who did not have a chance to tour the school and view children’s work this morning are welcome to stop by the school.

Small Group Brainstorming – Strengths of the Nelson School:

- *Small class size:* Multi-age conversations, opportunities for individualized help and feedback, teachers get to know students academically more intensively than is possible in large schools, each child benefits from the whole staff, great special ed services, special needs are known and quietly supported, ease of changing academic groups quickly, bright kids stay challenged, school can flex both to challenge bright students and to help those who struggle, logistics of small numbers make it easy to organize creative field trips, problem-solving happens quickly, problems can’t hide or escalate.
- *Strong academics,* great/dedicated/child-centered faculty and staff, high academic achievement, success of students grades seven and above, strong high school graduation rate and college attendance, older kids come home and validate what is taught, success of students in life, good citizens. Holistic education, arts, academics, supportive social and developmental environment, balance of “the world” (Haiti, Chile, etc.) and “the bubble.”
- *Sense of community and family atmosphere,* integration of different age groups, everyone is known (can have disadvantages too), student-to-student mentoring and socialization across ages (morning circle, lunch, pride of older kids read to younger kids), positive accountability among students monitoring each other, sense of belonging to this place, this village, values of

our community, economic diversity. Safe place, children taught and practice mutual respect, minimal bullying, tradition and continuity are valued, easy to hook into traditions.

- *Facility that works well*, and once closed, may never open again. Pride in distinctive architectural design and character – “not a box.”
- *Parent participation and involvement*, open parent-teacher communication, re-emergence of the PTO, teachers know parents, parents meet each other, make enduring friendships, strengthens both the school community and the broader community.
- *Community awareness and investment in kids*, community support has been there for decades, school is a community focus, community work (fundraisers), school represents our community (morals, expectations, culture, ethics), non-school community members are involved and welcomed, school is small enough for the community to impact (tutoring, etc.)

Challenges and disadvantages of a small school: (one group said “none”)

- *Sometimes small is “too small,”* not enough exposure to diversity, few social choices, may not have social or academic peers when the grade is really small (1-2 students) or a child is too old for their group, can end up with unisex in one class, no choice of teacher, little to no option for change if there’s a student-student or student-teacher difficulty, potential for one weak teacher to have an out-sized impact on several grades, ratio of adults to kids is top-heavy, when do classes get too small in terms of academics and social development, lack of resources, “every child is known” can be a challenge as well as an advantage, no privacy, hard to “disappear” if you want to, hard for a diversity of voices to come out if they aren’t on the “our school is great” bandwagon, special needs children stick out more, social disadvantage for teachers with few colleagues, there are fewer parents who can get involved.
- *Older students have mixed needs*, small school works better for younger students, too limited and “boring” for 4th, 5th, and 6th graders, active interchange is not extensive between older kids and non-parent community members.
- *Need more curriculum content by grade level*, especially upper grades, science and social studies gap, hard to mix integrated approach vs. new grade-specific content mandates of No Child Left Behind,
- *Limits on after-school activities*, not enough critical mass for team sports, lack of experience with competition, no ability to participate in sports or clubs if you need transportation, hard to get on middle school sports teams if students lack the skills and prior experience, not enough mass/energy for after-school activities if teachers and parents are exhausted, remoteness makes it difficult to access a variety of activities, fewer resources in town (no store, baseball team, gym, etc.)
- *Transition to middle school:* entering middle school at 7th grade rather than 6th makes it hard for kids to figure out their social position when other kids have been there for a year, older 6th graders get “itchy” for more than Nelson School, 6th graders don’t get the middle-school experience, feel culture shock at Keene Middle School, huge change and huge increase in size, depends on the child and their level of prior involvement in Keene activities (sports), lack of cultural diversity affects Nelson kids’ ability to cope with differences encountered in Keene schools
- *Facility:* Need a larger kitchen and more space for “specials” (music, art, P.E.)

Creative ideas for responding to declining enrollment:

- *Add programs:* Public pre-K option (pre-school special ed students are currently bused to Keene), add before- and after-school programs with other schools, year-long extended day and summer programs with transportation for children of working parents, combine after-school sports with other towns.
- *Integrate elder programs with the school program,* lunch with kids, reading partners, older-younger activities, elders can save heating costs at home, “tuitioned” seniors, hire an aide for seniors, get grants for intergenerational programs, use our buses, empathy education for children, teach seniors technology and computer skills or basic math/science review.
- *Make the building available for other uses:* use the facility off-hours, think creatively about community needs for space, adult ed with a program to pay for tuition, internet café, afternoon and evening programs special to Nelson, senior programs, kids-elders program, multi-use, day care, community center.
- *Look into possibilities for reconfiguring grades in combination with other schools.* See “Next steps” below for specific ideas that were generated.
- *Build more affordable workforce housing:* Not enough for younger families, town make-up is long-term residents with little housing turnover, provide incentives to home sellers to attract families with kids.
- *Market the town and the school:* Nelson Planning Board is working on how to make the community encouraging to young families, publicize Nelson with the school as a plus, make an effort to attract out-of-district students, attract students from Keene, make more effort to reach out to other small towns and schools for teachers and community, reach out to home-schooled and private-school families to promote the community. Marketing ideas:
 - Add to the school’s page on Nelson’s town website
 - Market the school through realtors
 - Better brochure, too generic now, highlight how Nelson is different, teaching is individualized for all students including bright kids too, highlight 5-year garden project
 - More publicity: blow our horn more, press releases, inserts in the Sentinel and Shopper, fan club for Nelson school, ‘onesies’ that say “Nelson School,” celebrate our alums, hold class reunions, blog/email for life/Facebook fan page, blinking neon signs with test scores at exit ramp!
- *Solve the disconnect between the school community and larger community,* enlist the community beyond parents, integrate community volunteers’ time and talents in special ed early intervention (might produce good outcomes for kids and lower the need for special ed services in middle and high school), make a family tree of our town, get high school kids to do community service for credit (help in Nelson, Habitat, recycling).
- *Legislative and school funding advocacy:* Push for repeal of No Child Left Behind, eliminate roadblocks to tuitioning across towns, push state and federal government to take more responsibility for school funding.

- *Watch but don't act yet:* Is this just a question of getting through a normal cycle? Make a 5-year commitment not to close the school and avoid a crisis mentality so teachers don't worry about their jobs from year-to-year and families considering a move to Nelson can feel confidence about having a school.
- *Combine efforts with other towns:* Combine PTA groups for better fundraising.
- *Look for efficiencies:* is all staffing required?
- *Wishful thinking:* "put fertility drugs in the water," tax incentives for having more children!

Investigate Further: Participants would like the School Board and SAU to gather more information on the following priorities.

1. ***How small is too small – academically, socially, and fiscally?*** Is there a tipping point beyond which we can't go?
2. ***Watch but don't close the Nelson School or merge with Harrisville. Make a 5-year plan so staff, parents, and families thinking of moving here know what to count on.*** Is this a normal long-term cycle we just need to get through? Keep the school open, use year-to-year budgeting to manage through the cycle. Look for efficiencies where possible, though external mandates limit options. Create a multi-year plan so teachers don't worry about their jobs from year to year. Don't undermine confidence of families considering a move to Nelson, or we will sabotage our own goal of increasing enrollment. Weigh the impact on our social fabric of changing the school vs. our tax responsibility and accountability to residents. Look at how to reduce un-ease for residents if the question isn't resolved, and how school costs could be cut in order to reduce the tax burden on residents.
3. ***Study creative possibilities so we know the advantages, disadvantages, and feasibility.*** Doesn't mean we'll do it - but we should act responsibly in getting the information:
 - Add public pre-K
 - Send 6th graders to Keene
 - Share specials (art, music, P.E.) with Harrisville
 - Reconfigure schools: K-4 here, 5-8 at Harrisville? So 7th and 8th graders can stay locally and older students can be in larger groups
 - K-8 in Nelson and reconfigure Harrisville as a rural regional high school for grades 9-12 students from Harrisville-Nelson-Stoddard, perhaps with an environmental focus
 - Create a charter school
 - Create a magnet school
 - Close the school and tuition children to other schools (Harrisville, Keene)

Next Steps: The forum summary will be e-mailed to participants, and issues will be taken up subsequently at School Board meetings, which are open to the public. Some participants requested that the School Board vary the time of its meetings so working residents can attend.