

A Building Decision

The Oyster River Cooperative School Board will be making a decision about the viability of the current middle school facility. I am writing to explain why we are addressing this issue, and how we will proceed.

The current building, in true New England fashion, is a set of additions. The oldest section was built in 1935, with major additions in 1954, 1979, and most recently 1996. The building has evolved to the point that it is a sprawling structure with 1500 feet of corridor and 60,000 square feet of roof—the equivalent of three football fields. Connecting the various additions has led to ramps, lifts, and half-floors that make navigation difficult for anyone with mobility issues

Because of the age and unusual configuration of the middle school, the Board has faced continuing costs to maintain it. For example, we need to make over \$800,000 in upgrades to the Heating, Ventilation, and Cooling systems—and in the near term we face \$300,000-\$1,000,000 for roofing. The Board must regularly confront the dilemma of how much to invest in an old building that was never designed to be a middle school in the first place.

In 2014, the Board commissioned Stephen Blatt Architects to “evaluate the facilities impact on the delivery of the academic program.” In addition to examining previous facility studies, Blatt met with teachers, administrators, and support staff to get their assessment of the viability of the building.

In May 2015, Blatt presented his report to the Board. He identified serious deficiencies in the building. Here are some of them:

- The current site consists of 11.5 acres, considerably less than the 16-17 acres that current guidelines would recommend. Furthermore the large footprint and placement of the building limit the use of the existing site—and creates a chronic traffic build-up at the beginning and end of the day.
- Only 55% of classrooms meet current size guidelines for a middle school.
- This space problem is especially acute for the art classrooms that are only 65% of the recommended size.
- The spaces for Special Education are inadequate: they are mostly makeshift, frequently undersized, some having no daylight.
- The space for music (both band and chorus) is 60% of the recommended guidelines, and the shortage of storage and practice space necessitate that the corridors be used for this purpose.
- The Tech Ed and STEM space is inadequate and makes integration to the curriculum difficult.

- The building lacks informal gathering spaces throughout the facility where students can work collaboratively and where staff can meet with a student for planned or spontaneous counselling.

Blatt's report concludes: "From programmatic, physical plant, and site configuration perspectives, we feel that the existing building should not be further expanded or modified in a piecemeal fashion." The full Blatt report, and a follow-up examination of options for construction are available on the ORCSD website by following the link to the ORMS Facilities Committee and clicking on Facility Reports.

In response to this report, the Board has established a Superintendent's Facility Committee that includes members from the three town councils, the community, the school administration, and the Board. This committee is charged to review the relevant reports, explore a full range of options for dealing with these identified deficiencies, and make a recommendation to the Board by June 2018.

We are taking the first step in what will surely be a long road to final action on the middle school. We invite the community to weigh in on this issue: to pose questions, offer ideas, impressions, and concerns. These can be directed to Superintendent Morse (jmorse@orcscd.org) who will lead the Facilities Committee. This will be an opportunity to explore what we want from a middle school—and how a building can support that vision.

As a Board we will do our best to listen, and to keep the community informed as we move forward.

Sincerely,

Thomas Newkirk, Chair
Oyster River Cooperative School Board