

December 25, 2009

Dear Parents and Community Members:

As many of you know, we have been making plans to accommodate current and future student enrollment. I want to update you on that progress and address some of the concerns that have been addressed by some members of the community.

Recently, a letter was delivered to my office. It was the last day of school before the winter break. I was expected to provide a response by December 24th. A recent bout of the flu kept me out of the office that day and has kept me from responding sooner.

The staff left for their holiday. The Board does not meet again until January, during the regularly scheduled meeting.

Therefore, the response I am providing is clearly my own.

For the past two years, we have been following the directive of the Board to address student enrollment needs. Several studies by outside entities have been conducted and shared in the public with the Board. Last year, a committee was convened. The committee was made up of parents, teachers and principals. Members of my staff were there to provide information which was part of their particular job responsibility. The committee looked at instructional programs, looked at possible sites which are currently considered part of the existing school facilities, looked at enrollment from a number of different angles and also reviewed cost estimations for operational and capital. They dealt with massive amounts of information and gave a great deal of their time.

There were 13 options considered. There were no sacred cows. All documents were posted on the website for review by the community. The committee made their recommendation to the Board and I supported it. I supported it even though it was not the option that I originally put forth; which was to house the 4/5th graders at Renfroe Middle School.

When we began the process, my inclination was to place the 4/5 Academy on the same site as Renfroe. My reasoning was: less transitions, fewer classrooms to be built, shared main facilities and keep the IB Program functioning as one unit.

Before the Board voted, there were two public meetings held to solicit input. They were advertised. Anyone could have participated and been heard. At these meetings, quite a few parents spoke against the idea of placing the 4/5 at RMS. Many teachers, staff and parents were excited that the 4/5 Academy should have its own home at Fifth Avenue. Following these meetings, I supported the committee's choice wholeheartedly. The Board took their final vote last year before the end of the school year.

With the aim of opening the new school as quickly as humanly possible, the staff and I have been working feverishly to iron out the details. I have been in constant communication with the City Manager to determine if the school system might be provided the title to Fifth Avenue. I have presented to the Mayor and Commissioners about the Fifth Avenue project as early as last August. Everyone in city leadership that I have spoken with has been extremely supportive. At this point, I would like to interject that in all that time, during all those discussions, the property of Beacon Hill has never been mentioned.

Meanwhile, the title has been transferred and accepted by the School Board, legal and financial documents have been drawn up by experts. Three builders/architectural groups received the details and created conceptual drawings. They presented to a committee of school and community people and the committee chose to award the contract to New South. Mr. Thomas, Mrs. Mack and members of the Oakhurst Committee were part of the team. Dr. Lee and Mr. Thomas, both at Glennwood, were instrumental in providing some instructional information and use of spaces within the current 4/5 Academy. Conceptual drawings by New South can be found on the website. It is very important to note and to continue to say that these are only “conceptual”.

The next month, after our return to school, will be filled with meetings to discuss the possibilities and flesh out the details. The builder and architect plan to meet with the K-3 SLT's and the 4/5 SLT. By the end of January, they hope to have enough input into what we would like to see in the new building. Remember, we have a finite budget so the dance will be between what we all want to have, what we need to have and what we can afford. Still, after having completed the High School Master Plan Project, I feel confident that it can be done.

So now we find ourselves at the point of this letter. Some members of the Decatur Community have delivered a letter to my office which has been shared publicly and discussed on the blogs. They are insisting that there is a better site for this school. It is not one of our sites; we don't hold title and the police currently use the building. In response, I asked CSD's experts, Mr. Gene Ponder and Ms. Susan Simpson to go and review the site. Ms. Simpson wrote a memo which is a synopsis of their review. I will attach this to my letter.

For me, the concerns are numerous but these are the top ones:

- 1) This is a low lying site. Just correcting the water issue will add significant costs and time to the budget.
- 2) The Housing Authority is also undergoing construction in the area and will be in construction for several years to come.
- 3) The site is close to MARTA and the railroad.
- 4) The street is rather narrow and doesn't have the same possibilities that Fifth Avenue does with the less traveled roads and the property set back.
- 5) This is a busy area with a pool and a field almost in constant use.
- 6) Delaying now will cost us precious time and additional dollars.

Perhaps most important is the timing. We need this new building as soon as possible. Construction on Fifth Avenue can begin immediately, as soon as we get the funding, which will be in January. Construction will not impact students because the building is currently abandoned. Construction on the new building can be on going as students remain in the existing buildings.

If we stop this project to explore yet another remote possibility and one that already appears to have significant issues, we may find ourselves eight months or more into the New Year, with no solution.

There are other reasons as well. Currently, we will receive good rates for financing and building. Waiting leaves us at a disadvantage in terms of costs as the economy turns around.

Perhaps many of you do not know that this plan has always included an opportunity to provide some much needed assistance to RMS. Part of the financing plan will allow us to transfer approximately 1 million to the RMS campus for much needed HVAC renovations and the revamping of the electrical systems so the school can utilize appropriate technology. This will not be possible if the plan is halted.

I would like to address some of the comments which have caused such alarm. We are not even at the design stage and already people are being told that there will not be enough classrooms, play areas and so on. The size of Fifth Avenue has become a bone of contention. First, let me say that we never gave any committee member erroneous information. I have had a survey done and know the size of the property-it was not pointed out to me by community members. We gave the survey information to the builders to review; we used it to secure the financing.

Fifth Avenue will be taken down and a new structure built up; which will be designed to fit the site. The Fifth Avenue site is being compared to Glennwood. Using Glennwood is so misleading since you can't compare an existing property, that was built with 14 classrooms and corresponding internal spaces to meet the needs of approximately 250 students, to one that is being asked to house 500 in the future.

The new facility will have 25 classrooms and corresponding interior areas; such as cafeteria and hallways. It is my hope that the cafeteria will be large enough to serve half of the population at one seating. We are planning flexible spaces which will be used by fewer children during pull out situations and can still be used by larger groups. We would like one room to be designated as the science lab. These are just first blush ideas and much more must be worked out during the next phase of this process.

Throughout this very long process, we have been very open and willing to discuss ideas. This very important decision has been made with a great deal of input and participation. Now that the decision has been made, I would like to be allowed to focus on the execution and delivery of the model that was chosen.

As we move into the New Year of 2010, there are so many wonderful opportunities on which our school system and community should focus.

We will be planning a new Career Technical Academy with an unprecedented grant award of 3 million dollars to the City Schools of Decatur. We will need help from the business community to help us reach our vision of developing career opportunities and training for our students and our citizens who wish to take advantage of the offerings.

We will begin a focus to shape the new DHS Performing Arts Center into a new instructional site for our students. The Performing Arts Center will be one in which our students can hone their skills and we can reach out to the surrounding arts' community to bring in cultural events during the day and open the performances up at night to the greater community. We are just in the beginning stages but if you have been in the new buildings that were part of the Campus Plan, you know that we have a jewel in our midst.

We will also begin a new strategic planning process complete with many opportunities for the parents, teachers, students and community to be heard. This new plan, while not slated for completion until sometime during the 2010-2011 school year, will take CSD through the next 3-5 years in vision and strategies.

I am asking that you think about the success of your school system and provide the room for the staff to flesh out the details. I am excited about the 4/5 Academy at Fifth Avenue. I believe that we can design a building to suit the needs of the students at this very important age.

Sincerely,

Phyllis Edwards