

Dear Families and Staff;

As many of you have no doubt heard by now, Berkeley Heights Public School District is planning to offer Universal Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) starting in the 2021-2022 School Year. With this news come the question(s) of how the district can accomplish this task utilizing our current buildings.

We will be sharing a comprehensive presentation and answering questions at our next BOE meeting on Thursday, April 8th. Additionally, we will be conducting two Town Hall style meetings the following week on April 14th and 19th to obtain additional parent input/feedback and answer additional questions. In the interim, we would like to take a moment to bring the community up to speed on a few items related to this topic in advance of the meeting.

It's been over 20 years since any modifications have been made to the grade structure of our schools, yet our community has grown and changed significantly. Full Day Kindergarten is vital to the future of our district. Several of our neighboring towns offer it and the vast majority of the State provides it. Educational trends, data and studies show that children benefit from a strong Kindergarten foundation and that a full day program is the best way to achieve this. That said, thoughtful, careful implementation is key to our success, and all factors/variables are being considered.

There are two key considerations 1) Mary Kay McMillin ECC doesn't have the capacity to house all of the Kindergarten and 1st grade students when the district implements our comprehensive FDK, and 2) We have an opportunity to better balance the ratio of reading specialists, school counselors, psychologists, and child study team members so all students, regardless of class size and school attended, are receiving equitable support. These factors are driving the need to better align our K-5 student population.

Our approach is anchored around five guiding principles:

- Make our schools developmentally appropriate for like-aged children and provide equitable services for all students
- Optimize the efficiency of our resources by balancing enrollment across all elementary schools
- Provide for future growth given the new housing developments currently underway
- Minimize the change impact, where possible, for students changing schools
- Maximize, where possible, the number of children who can walk to school

Several have asked "What's the process for approving this?" and "Will parents have input before the recommendation is final?" The answer is yes.

As stated above the presentation/discussion will occur at the April 8th BOE meeting. Following that meeting two town hall meetings will be conducted on April 14th and April 19th where parents can provide additional feedback and get more of their questions answered. The Board will vote on the recommendation at its April 29th meeting. To be clear, **no final decision** will be made at the April 8th meeting.

The presentation will address our staffing imbalances, our goal to have more consistent class sizes with staff members providing equitable services to the maximum number of students, designing more developmentally appropriate schools (i.e., closer age-ranges within a school),

all redistricting options that were considered, the curricular, staffing & facilities benefits of the recommended approach, and the considerations and potential impacts of that approach. This has to be accomplished in a fiscally prudent way to minimize cost as we have a responsibility to ALL taxpaying residents in our town.

Working with the BHPS administrative and educational staff, and other leaders in the field of early child education, our team considered the following options (in no particular order):

- Do nothing, postpone the implementation of FDK another year
- Move the 1st grade students to the current three elementary schools, while keeping all Kindergarten students at MKM
- Move the 1st grade students to the current three elementary schools, while keeping all Kindergarten students at MKM, and move certain Hughes neighborhoods to Woodruff (*note*: Hughes currently has the highest student enrollment, while Woodruff has the lowest student enrollment for Grades 2 – 5)
- Move to two grade K – 2 schools and two grade 3 – 5 schools

The team analyzed and evaluated multiple variations of the options above with attention paid to ALL student transitions. This includes our yearly transition (e.g. 1st grade students leaving MKM and moving to Hughes, Woodruff or Mountain Park) and other transitions that would occur as a result of the realignment. Additional consideration was given to students that might transition twice in two years as a result of changes, special education/Individual Education Plan (IEP) students and those students that can walk to school.

To reiterate, this is an incredible opportunity for all of us. It's a change from our existing structure, one that will be impactful in its benefit to all of us in Berkeley Heights, and one that we want to make sure is transparent and well understood so that we collectively embrace it from the onset. Our school district – the Board of Education, administrative team and entire elementary school staff remains committed to continuing our excellence in elementary education, and to that end, any agreed upon changes to our existing school configuration will be made with this continued pledge to excellence.

In closing, this is an opportunity that will benefit our entire educational system. Whether you're a parent/guardian who has a child going into Kindergarten or not, you should know this initiative further strengthens our top-notch education.

We look forward to people attending both the April 8th BOE meeting and the subsequent town hall meetings.

Sincerely,
Dr. Melissa Varley and Doug Reinstein

And for the COVID update, we have had no new cases since our 3/19 update.