

## Questions and Answers about Proposed Changes to Fairfield Community Schools 4.14.2014

*Why does the 6th grade at MES need to be moved to the new middle school? What is the "Middle School Experience" that we hear you referring to? How is the "middle school experience" different than the current 6th grade? Will MES 6th graders be behind the STEAM students when they merge in 7th grade at the Jr High? Have you considered having the Practical Arts Academy for 7-8 and keeping K-6 the same at all schools?*

The middle school experience is defined in a couple of ways. One is that teachers in a middle school work to make connections across curricular areas in ways that young adolescents need. This is accomplished by creating blocks for social studies and language arts and for math and science. Further, teachers in specialty areas provide students a "smorgasbord" of experiences with exposure to various electives so that it piques their interest and introduces them to career opportunities. This would include technology education, family & consumer science, agriculture, business & finance, German, and the fine arts. For the middle school schedule, a teacher's load would be six periods of teaching, a prep period, and a student resource time (SRT) for homework help, making up tests, and some activity planning. For a teacher in English, math, science, or social studies to have 6 sections to teach, we can have 2 sections at each grade level from 6-8 for the total of 6 sections. Also, many students in sixth grade are ready for the experience of switching classes and having more responsibility in learning. With current junior high teachers transferring to Millersburg for the middle school classes, there will be staff who can ensure that students are ready for the move to the junior or senior high school whether they leave for grade 7 or grade 9.

*What guarantee do we have from the Amish community that they will keep their children in the public school system? The comments I hear from my Amish neighbors are that they don't like all the fuss this is causing, they are embarrassed to think that this change is because of them and that they would rather "handle their education needs on their own". I also hear comments like, "we didn't ask for any changes, the school came to us." Is the practical arts approach really necessary?*

The school did go to some Amish families to ask what could be done to better meet their needs since they constitute 60% of the students at MES and because they have been choosing to leave our public schools. If any group from the community were choosing to leave our schools in large numbers, then we would want to meet with them to know why. Neighboring districts have been experiencing the same things. We cannot guarantee the Amish will keep their students in public school any more than we can guarantee non-Amish families will. With increased competition and the push from the State and private school companies to challenge public schools, there will be many things happening to lure families away. This proposal helps us meet the needs of a sizeable segment of our population, Amish and non-Amish:

1. For a number of kinesthetic and practical learners, this hands-on approach makes sense. There are students who do not "sit and get;" they need to be less theoretical and more "real world" in the learning they do. A number of non-Amish families have commented this is precisely the kind of teaching that their kids would have or will respond to.
2. Our graduation rate at FJSHS has fallen from 94% to 89.5%. There are a growing number of students for whom we are not connecting the dots and grabbing soon enough. A practical model where they see the learning they do connected to their everyday world helps capture those students, helps them see possibilities for their future, and then puts them on the pathways for a successful high school experience.
3. The inquiry model implemented at all elementary schools will form the same foundation for all that is done. We are moving beyond learning facts and the material deemed necessary for standardized tests to provide students the skills necessary for life.

*How do you address the possibility that MES could become a highly concentrated Amish school within the system? How does this create unity within the Fairfield School System? Will there be balanced of "soft skills" taught at all elementary schools. I am concerned about the cultures (Amish and English) colliding and being successful (struggles now at times).*

MES is already a highly-concentrated Amish school. It is at its lowest number of students in the past 7 years, yet it is at its highest percentage at 60%. Not too long ago it was at 40%. The school does have more and more Amish enrolling, and we simply have to be responsive to the needs of those families as a *public* school. Our teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators at all our schools already address issues of tolerance and accommodating differences within the school day for various school demographic groups. Unity is maintained by people realizing the district's goal is to meet the needs of all learners and advocate for students to become problem solvers and thinkers, not just memorizers. Unity is maintained by people not thinking that the school is doing something "to" students because we are proposing these changes "for" students. Unity is maintained by everyone realizing that all three buildings will have much of the same programming and what is different in the future is just a reflection of what is already different now.

*What reasoning do you have for the parents that believe STEAM is better and that one school is giving a "less than" education to its students? What curriculum will be MES be using that will make it so different from STEAM schools? Will all teachers K-3 be receiving the same training since the foundational skills will be the same at all 3 buildings?*

In grades K-3 the learning in all three schools will be very, very similar with foundational math, reading, writing, and science being taught. All three buildings will use the Benchmark Literacy curriculum; all three buildings will use the same locally developed writing curriculum and grammar program; all three schools will follow the same math curriculum. All three schools will still use the same inquiry-based science kits that the district has used for the past three years, and social studies standards for the State of Indiana will be taught. As we move to problem-based learning where students ask questions and investigate solutions and propose answers, all teachers in all three schools will learn the same inquiry model so all students are presented the same format for inquiry. The teachers who have been driving the instruction in classrooms now and working collaboratively to provide those experiences will be integral to creating the new inquiry units and big ideas for students to explore. No one from the district level will impose what those ideas are going to be; no one at the district level or no building principal will say for things to be "dumbed down." Teachers will be empowered to teach students in ways that match students' learning styles and respond to the students sitting in front of them.

*When will teachers be trained? Will they be compensated? Will the professional development be during school year? How will that affect the calendar? Will teachers be able to transfer between buildings to ensure the best "fit" in all buildings, or will that be based on seniority?*

Staff training will take place during the school year and during the summer. Training during the year will take place in a way similar to what we have done for science and writing and reading curriculum the past three years with full days provided to a grade level to meet across all schools under the direction of a curriculum guide or coach. This coming year, we will provide basic training in the inquiry model to teacher teams in order to create an inquiry model under the guidance of ETHOS and district staff. For training in the summer time, that will be tiered professional development for teachers based on their level of knowledge and comfort with inquiry. Teachers who have more knowledge/comfort will receive different training than those who need more support. However, part of the time will also be collaborative to work on units for implementation in the classroom. Grants will compensate teachers for this time beyond their contracts. This combination of training should not impact the school calendar. Teachers have been surveyed to determine where they would like to be and almost all of expressed an interest in staying where they are. For those who would like to transfer, those will be reviewed as we have retirements this year and as we move forward in order to have that best "fit" at each school. Seniority will be a lesser consideration behind teacher preference and teacher evaluation ratings.

*Funding: You stated there is a lot of grant money available for these changes. The grant money supports all the STEAM changes, what about financial resources for the Practical Arts program? What is the plan for when the grants run out?*

The upcoming Math-Science Partnership grant allows us to have three years of funding for the professional development necessary for the inquiry model all teachers will receive. It also allows us to hire a teacher to work with all teachers on the inquiry model we roll out. This allows us time to start the transition next year and ramp up for the changes for 2015-2016. There are also federal grant dollars we receive every year through the Title II program that we use for professional development, too. These dollars have been constant in the past several years, and they provide us a way to conduct teacher training and collaboration during the school day. Also, one very solid grant opportunity we are working on with ETHOS will provide further resources for teachers, and there is another possibility in the works that I am discussing this spring with the Smithsonian Institution Science Center for inquiry of the kind we are talking about in all three schools and in science at the junior senior high school... Initial equipment for spaces like the family and consumer science kitchen, tech ed lab, and science lab at Millersburg are included in the soft costs of construction. Future resources and supplies will be paid for out of current sources, and as the model of instruction changes, the way we spend dollars on supplies will change. It won't necessarily be more spending; it will be different spending.

*What is the actual timeline for this project? How will building projects be funded? Will there be a referendum or general funds? You talked about numbers and building plans. What will the building structure of MES look like, so there isn't a mix of elementary and middle school students? What about the fact that the STEAM changes may not be supported by the majority of Fairfield families? Who makes the final decision and is it based only on this initial survey? Superintendent alone, school board, popular vote on the ballot?*

In order to have buildings ready for 2015-2016, the process for moving on construction would have to start as soon as possible. That is why the surveys and conversations have begun at this point so we know whether we can move forward with planning to break ground in the fall. Construction would not need to happen by referendum, but would be subject to the petition process. Plans now call for the west wing north of the cafeteria to become the middle school space with classrooms

and elective area spaces added toward the courtyard and out that end of the building. Feedback so far has been running in favor of the proposed changes with people more interested in logistics and doing the inquiry model right for all students. The final decision about whether this moves forward rests with the school board.

*Transportation: How is this going to look and what are the costs? Especially for those who decide that they want their kids at a STEAM school, but live within MES lines.*

Frankly, this is our final consideration in the process because we want to get the learning right. We do not want the learning to be driven by bussing. In days past, there were transfers between schools that took place through working with bus drivers to determine the best ways to get students where they need to be. We foresee needing some express buses and doing a hub system in the morning similar to what happens in the afternoon in order to shuffle students to where they need to go. Mr. Sharp, who at one time oversaw transportation, and I are committed to working with my transportation secretary and the bus drivers to find the most efficient system. We have computerized transportation software to help us work through many scenarios to find the best fit.

*Can you guarantee that if I want my child to go to a STEAM school that there will be room there for them? What happens if these 2 schools run out of room? What about class sizes?*

We have room at all schools for other students, and we will do all we can to accommodate family requests. As of April 13, survey results indicate that about 30 students may want to transfer into Millersburg with about as many wanting to transfer out, so the shift in students is manageable. As for class sizes, the district will have to look at that and does have that as a limiting factor as it does now. With the movement of students, there could be the potential for adding a teacher at a grade level to alleviate some high classes sizes, but there could also be circumstances where class sizes might increase due to students moving out of a building at a particular grade level.

*Will a family have to apply for a transfer every year once the transfer has been granted? Will family groups/ students all get the transfer if requested, not just one of three?*

Once a transfer has been granted for in-district students, that student will be considered a part of that school from that point forward beginning 2015-2016. This will be a change in procedure from the current system where there is a renewal each year. Students shifting schools within the district will be handled differently from students coming in from outside the district. Families will be kept together if they so choose.

*How long will bus rides be for kids who go to MES to Benton or New Paris or vice versa? Will school hours change or the day be lengthened? Will late start be reinstated next year?*

It is anticipated that school hours will roughly remain the same. With some of the expressing of students between schools, there may be some adjustments. Also, there is some talk from the State of Indiana about flexibility in times for school districts with an A letter grade, so we may be looking at times as part of that once we receive more guidance. We try very hard to keep bus rides to no longer than an hour to 70 minutes if we can help it, so that will still be our goal. The late-start collaborative Wednesdays will return for 2014-2015 and subsequent years; they were only reclaimed in the effort to make up time due to the weather this year.

*What higher institution will be credentialing teachers for Early College and dual credit?*

Ivy Tech will be that institution of higher learning with credits for students granted from the local Elkhart County campus. The Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis is the entity that oversees our involvement in Early College, providing guidance and support on teacher training, logistics, and rigor.

*The community is concerned that this is going to divide our district, especially the elementary schools. They are also afraid that this is going to change the town of Millersburg (i.e. people will choose not to move here, some may move out).*

People move because they think their schools are failing them. These proposed changes make the educational program we are offering stronger and people should keep in mind the following:

1. The school will be taught by nearly all of the same teachers and have the same principal and support staff. Some middle school teachers will be new hires, but some will be teachers voluntarily coming from Fairfield Jr-Sr High School who know high school expectations. Teachers will have the latitude to meet the needs of the students who are sitting in front of them.
2. Core curriculum K-5 will remain the same for language arts, reading, math and science. Title I programs and ESL supports will still be in place.

3. There is more technology coming to Millersburg than there has ever been. Its use will be integrated into the classroom and will be available during enrichment time. High ability students will be receiving high ability curriculum units through learning management software in coming years.
4. The inquiry process that is behind the problem-based learning is raising the bar for all students and will be the same across all schools.
5. Sixth grade students will have more art and music per week, more social studies and science per week, and exposure to special subjects that don't begin at Fairfield Jr-Sr High School until 7<sup>th</sup> grade. With a middle school schedule, students have more independence and more movement during the day because they will switch classes for each subject like the junior high and high school do.
6. All elementary schools, including Millersburg, will keep art, music, and physical education at all grade levels K-6.

*Can FCS handle all these changes? Does it not seem like we are asking teachers to change teaching styles and what happens in the classroom? Isn't this move forcing adult decisions on students causing anxiety?*

All of the changes proposed here are to be more responsive to what students need and meet their learning style better. Because we will not see the true learning profile and interests of a student until after third grade, the primary programs offered KG-grade 3 will not differ drastically from what is offered now. As parents and teachers get to know their students and their learning styles/interests, then a choice can be made to steer a student a particular direction. However, with the inquiry model similar at grades 4-6 at all three buildings, there is no need to move a student even in those grades. The real moment of decision for families will arise for the beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> grade as they choose between a more practical arts approach at Millersburg versus the more traditional junior high preparation of Fairfield Jr-Sr High School. Because of the inquiry model in the elementary schools, there will be differences in the way teaching and learning are done, but this is a necessary change to prepare students for a future as problem solvers. As teachers were introduced to this proposal in February, many of them were anxious, but then became excited about the possibilities for teaching and broadening what they do in the classroom. This will not simply be "more" piled on top of what they currently do; this will come to replace and be done differently. This will require teacher training, but we intend to provide that very deliberately and do so with teachers at the center of the problem-based units we develop. Nothing will be imposed from "the top" or from the outside. Because of this respect for the educators in the classroom and because of the work being done hand-in-hand with the superintendent, principals, teachers, and training experts, we are confident we can navigate this change successfully.

*Technology: Don't all these changes mean we will be more dependent on technology? What will this do to student fees? Will students bring devices home and will these come to replace books?*

Our current technology plan calls for us to have multiple devices in the elementary schools and the junior-senior high school. For grades KG-6, this means iPads and laptops or Chromebooks that will be available for students to complete on-line assessments, activities, and research and writing. For the elementary grades, the district does not plan any time soon to send devices home with students, and they will not come to replace leveled readers and content-area books. As a result, these will not appear as fees on student book bills since they are not replacing student texts. At the high school, subject areas are rolling in laptops for classroom use each year. This year has been English classes; social studies will happen next year. The goal is to roll those computers into classrooms and provide a period of transition to roll out textbooks. We are not going 1:1 with laptops all at one time, demanding teachers change the way they teach suddenly or that students get used to doing everything on computer all at one time. Instead, subject areas will develop units a few each year during this transitional time, so that in approximately 4-5 years the need for textbooks will be phased out and all computers in the school can be distributed to students for their use at school and at home. This will only happen in the junior-senior high school. The district will also develop a program for students in junior high/middle school to complete a sequence of technology education in order to earn the right to have that laptop for their own use.

*Sports: How will the proposed changes affect sports and participation in grades 7-8?*

This is part of a larger conversation we are having about sports in general. In grades 5-6 participation has been dropping off, so the Athletic Director and the administrative team are looking at ways to revamp how sports are done in those grades. For grades 7-8, students who choose to attend Millersburg Practical Arts Academy can take part in sports at Fairfield Jr-Sr High School, and transportation will be provided from MPAA to FJSHS for that to take place. There has been preliminary discussion for Millersburg to have its own middle school teams for basketball and volleyball, and those

teams could play smaller schools in the region on their own schedule. With the school changes not taking place until 2015-2016, the upcoming school year can focus on changes to grades 5-6 and we can take the year to find the best arrangement for 7-8 for the next year.