

NESHAMINY

Board discusses where to send Tawanka students

The alternative program is one of two schools that the board is considering closing.

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Where should the Tawanka Learning Center students be transferred if their building closes this year? It depends on who you ask.

Administrators say the ideal location would be the district's Eisenhower building on Woodbourne Road, a former elementary school that houses facilities department and a nonprofit. A few board members think it will save money to place the kids in a middle school. But pupils and parents believe Tawanka's separate location is part of the program's success.

Home to the district's alternative program, Tawanka is one of two schools that the Neshaminy school board is considering closing as a result of rising expenses, declining enrollment and underutilized space. The other building is Neshaminy Middle School, officials said.

Since many of the program's 60 kids have had bad experiences at the Middletown high school, most of the middle schools would need renovations to take in Tawanka and elementary schools don't have the space, Eisenhower would be the best choice, Superintendent Paul Kadri told the school board Tuesday night.

However, board member Frank Koziol didn't like that it could cost roughly \$240,000 to renovate Eisenhower for the students.

"I don't want to make a decision ... if we could have space in one of the middle schools," said Koziol, who added that he wants to see the program cut costs by removing its principal.

While he did not quote a price, Kadri said it could cost more to renovate a middle school to accommodate Tawanka than it would to refurbish Eisenhower. He also said that the program couldn't operate without an administrator.

Although state law prohibits the board from voting until June on whether to close Tawanka, Kadri asked the board for direction no later than this month so officials can start preparing students and facilities.

Tawanka services teens who aren't successful in a traditional high school setting because of emotional, social, behavioral and academic problems. Through smaller class sizes, individualized attention and counseling, Tawanka has reduced the district's dropout rate, decreased discipline issues, improved grades and provided at-risk students with coping strategies, administrators said.

The alternative program costs roughly \$1.45 million, or \$24,000 per student, to run a year. Without the in-district alternative program, it could cost the district \$1.1 million, plus tens of thousands per student in transportation costs to send them to another facility outside the district.

Several students, who testified that Tawanka has helped them and other kids improve in school, thanked the board for keeping alive the program and housing it elsewhere. A few parents, though, expressed disappointment and frustration that the program has to move at all.

Board member Susan Cummings agreed that part of Tawanka's success is its separate location.

"A middle school is not a good spot," she said. "You can't just stick these kids somewhere for a year."

Kadri said he will provide board members with more information on renovation costs and possible timelines during next week's meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday in the district's board room in Maple Point Middle School, 2250 Langhorne-Yardley Road in Middletown.