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EDUCATION

New schools in North, Kenmore? Closing elementary schools? Akron district considers options

Jennifer Pignolet Akron Beacon Journal

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Akron Public Schools is considering at least four versions of a long-term facilities plan that includes options for building new schools in Kenmore and North Hill and closing elementary schools.

The various options have massive implications for the neighborhoods and student populations involved, but also wider financial impacts for the district and the city as a whole, along with the possibility of mass redistricting.

A task force of administrators and community members developed the options, but the district and board officials have acknowledged community member attendance at the task force's six meetings was inconsistent.

The administration will present the options at a high level to the public during Monday night's school board meeting, held at 5:30 p.m. at 10 N. Main St. and streamed online here. But the board reviewed the options and debated them for over two hours during a working retreat over the weekend.

Board members plan to make a decision by the end of the month.

The board reviewed four options — labeled Options I, I-B, II and III — that all seek to solve the same problems.

North high school has a limited amount of useable years left and needs extensive renovations that could create an expensive domino effect as more problems are uncovered.

The Kenmore community is also facing becoming an education desert, with its high school closed and combined into the new Garfield CLC and a slew of other schools closed over the years.

Even after replacing most of its schools with community learning center buildings over the last 15 years, the district still has at least 10 buildings that are in use now in some form that have a growing list of deferred maintenance needs, including the Ott building, Pfeiffer and Firestone Park elementary schools and two early learning centers. Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts is in need of a new building, as is National Inventors Hall of Fame STEM High, which has an expiring lease with the University of Akron for space at the former Central-Hower high school building. Acquiring the former Morley Health Center building from the city and renovating it for STEM High is one solution that has been considered.

Schools in the North cluster are overcrowded, with Harris Jackson elementary so over-enrolled that its kindergarten classes were relocated.

But on the whole, the district's elementary schools are under-enrolled, with more than 4,000 available seats.

Of the options proposed so far, all involve closing the buildings of Firestone Park and Pfeiffer Elementary schools and the former Ott administration building. They also all involve relocating Miller South and constructing a new building for North. They all include a possible new athletic complex. However, they do not all include a new school building in Kenmore.

Some options include seeking a bond issue as well as using some of the district's \$96 million in stimulus funds.

The board could choose pieces or parts of each option or one in full. Here's what's in each option.

Option I - New North and new school in Kenmore

This option includes two new builds that would start almost immediately.

Close Firestone Park Elementary and the Ott Building in June 2024.

Relocate Pfeiffer Elementary and Miller South by June 2025.

Construct a new North High, grades 9-12, to be completed by August 2027.

Redistrict a portion of the North cluster by June 2024.

Move all East cluster sixth grade students to East CLC by June 2023.

Construct a new Kenmore School for grades K-8, which would hold Miller South, STEM Middle School and Pfeiffer Elementary students beginning in August 2025.

Open new preschool programs in community learning center elementary buildings where space available by August 2026.

Construct a new athletic complex on the former Kent middle campus, or Kenmore campus, including a turf football/soccer stadium, baseball field, softball field and a practice field, in a possible city/district collaboration.

This option would cost about \$140 million, and would require the district to take on substantial debt, but that debt could be retired through a bond issue, if the district was able to convince the public to support one. That would likely be in addition to an operating levy. This option proposes using at least \$20 million of the district's federal stimulus dollars.

Option I - B

This option is the same as the previous one in terms of projects, but it delays the completion of construction of a new North until August 2030. That pushes a bond issue off until 2026, so the district would seek the bond issue before accruing debt.

Option II

This option creates a new North campus to serve a wider range of grades, but does not include a new building in Kenmore.

Close Firestone Park Pfeiffer Elementary schools and relocate Miller South by June 2024.

Close the Ott building by June 2023.

Construct a new North campus, grades 6-12, to be completed August 2027.

Transition Jennings CLC middle school to an elementary school by August 2027.

Relocate Miller South to either Garfield CLC or Buchtel CLC by August 2024.

Move all East cluster sixth grade students to East CLC by June 2023.

Renovate the Morley building to house STEM High school by August 2024.

Open new preschool programs in CLC elementary buildings where space is available by August 2026.

Construction of new athletic campus at Kent middle or Kenmore campus

This plan is also expensive — it has an estimated financial impact of \$125 million and relies on using \$20 million in stimulus funds.

Option III — 'Savings Option'

This option includes a new North campus but no new building in Kenmore, and would consolidate several elementary schools, including ones not yet named.

Close Ott building by June 2023.

Close Firestone Park and Pfeiffer Elementary schools and the Stewart Early Learning Program building by June 2024.

Relocate Miller South by June 2024.

Close Essex Early Learning Program building by June 2025.

Construct a new North 6-12 campus by August 2030.

Repurpose two existing elementary CLC buildings by August 2024 to house Miller South and STEM Middle.

Convert National Inventors Hall of Fame STEM middle school to a high school.

Redistrict a portion of the North cluster by June 2024.

Move all East cluster sixth grade students to East CLC by June 2023.

Open new preschool programs in CLC elementary buildings by August 2026.

Construct a new athletic complex on the former Kent Middle campus or Kenmore campus by August 2027.

Transfer ownership of former Kenmore High to the city of Akron to repurpose as city leaders deem appropriate.

This option also assumes passage of a bond issue before taking on the debt for the new North campus, so the total cost after that is only \$15 million. It would save the district \$2.75 million a year in maintenance and staffing costs.

Contact education reporter Jennifer Pignolet at jpignolet@thebeaconjournal.com, at 330-996-3216 or on Twitter @JenPignolet.