

A

REVIEW OF THE

FEASIBILITY STUDY

OF THE

SEA ISLE CITY

PUBLIC SCHOOL

SICTA
Mar. 25, 2007

Executive Summary

Based on its review of the Feasibility Study, the Sea Isle City Taxpayers Association concludes:

- The Study failed to carry out the designated purpose of the Study by not considering all “other possible operating scenarios for the school district”.
- Several instances of bias were introduced into the Study.
- The study fails to include critical financial information relative to the viability of the Sea Isle City School District.

Study Review

The Sea Isle City Taxpayers Association (SICTA) has reviewed A Feasibility Study for the Sea Isle City School District that was prepared by the Educational Information and Resource Center (EIRC) in March 2007. The purpose of the Study was to: 1) determine the implications, advantages and disadvantages of the continued operation of the school, and 2) review other possible operating scenarios for the school district.

However, in Section III. B. Proposed Educational Plan, the authors decide to limit consideration of possible options to two: 1) to send all students to Ocean City and 2) to send all students to Middle Township. The supposed rationale for the selection of these two options is the statement that they resulted from “talking with numerous stakeholders”. The following paragraph then lists six individuals who met with the authors. What is not said is that other options were proposed to the consultants and obviously ignored. Although the authors say “the selection of these two scenarios serves to provide an educational and financial comparison of Sea Isle options and does not prevent consideration of other options”. **One of the two purposes of the Study was to “review other possible operating scenarios for the school district”. By making an arbitrary decision to ignore other options the consultants have failed to honor the terms of the Study.**

Section III. C. Assessment Data presents data that examines student achievement on the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) in comparison with peer groups in comparable districts. These data indicate that Sea Isle students are outperforming their peer group but fall below state wide results in Language Arts and Mathematics.

It should be noted that while Sea Isle students fared well compared to students in comparable districts, having 30 % of the students not proficient in Language Arts and 46% of the students not proficient in mathematics raises serious question regarding the educational quality of the academic program. Attaining the state standards for student success, while meeting the State Supreme Court’s definition of a “thorough education”, does not adequately prepare students for a career. In the recently released Educational Testing Service Policy Information Report entitled America’s Perfect Storm (ETS, Jan. 2007) the authors point out that International surveys indicate that American student

average performance is no better than mediocre and graduates will increasingly have difficulty competing for high paying jobs.

A multiyear review of the performance of Sea Isle City eighth graders on the GEPA shows a continuing pattern of under performance. High numbers of students who are 'partially proficient' in the critical areas of language arts and mathematics do not project into a successful academic record at the high school level.

The projections in Section II, C follow state guidelines but are optimistic considering the downturn in Sea Isle City births. Indeed, as not shown in Table 5, we suspect those births to be less than five (5) for the 2005 year. It is likely that Table 7's projections should be reduced by an additional 5 –10 enrollments per year.

Section III, 4 presents a "selected" comparison of the curricula at Ocean City and Middle Township. This section is puzzling for two reasons. First, in 1996, the State Board of Education adopted the Core Curriculum Content Standards which define what every student should know and be able to do when completing thirteen years of public education. It is left to each district to determine the most appropriate education program by which students will achieve the State Standards. Thus, the true test of a curriculum is the student pass rate on the State proficiency tests.

Second, the section includes a comprehensive listing of academic programs and extracurricular activities at Ocean City while a very different, and limited, description is presented for Middle Township. Based on the information presented, one would conclude that the program offered by Ocean City is far superior to that offered by Middle Township. A review of the academic and extracurricular programs offered by the Middle Township Public Schools shows a great variety of programs that are not accurately described in the Feasibility Study. When one compares the Middle Township programs, described in Attachment One, to those listed by the Consultants as offered by Ocean City, one must conclude the programs are very similar in the two districts.

In Section IV. Financial Analysis the Study developed data based on the hypothesis that the Sea Isle City Board of Education entered into a non-operating status and developed a complete sending relationship with one of five districts (Ocean City, Dennis Township, Middle Township, the chARTer High School, and the Cape May County Vocational High School). Mention is made that the review "does not preclude the school district entering into a sending relationship with another district of deemed appropriate". In Subsection D. Review of equalized Valuations, the authors state "in the case of Sea Isle City, higher property valuation per pupil would cause higher amounts of support than any of the neighboring school districts in the event of the formation of a regional school district. For that reason the formation of a regional district is not recommended at this time". The authors did not include information provided by the SICTA representative that exploratory discussions have begun with representatives from Avalon, Sea Isle, and Stone Harbor on a wide range of shared services between the three towns. At the initial meeting of that group, it was decided to focus on the possible integration of the three

schools. A jointure agreement between the three Boards of Education would negate the issue of higher property valuation.

The Study develops several scenarios to show the impact on Sea Isle City. The scenarios exclude the ChARTer High School and the Cape May County Vocational technical High School because "... both schools accept students based on specific criteria and would not accept all students from one district on a continuing basis". The authors are correct in their exclusion of the ChARTer High School since it is focused on the fine and performing arts. However, the statement regarding the County Vocational School is not correct. By Statute, County Vocational Schools are schools of choice based on the student's desire to attend. Admission assessment must be based on the results of the Eight Grade Proficiency Assessment as per the Commissioner's Decision in Pompton Lakes v. Bergen County Vocational School. The same decision states that when the number of "qualified" applicants exceeds the number of available seats, the students must be chosen by lot. Further, the State Supreme Court ruled in Englewood v. Englewood Cliffs that the County Vocational School may enter into a restrictive relationship with a local school district. Since the tuition charged by the County Vocational School is approximately half that charged by Ocean City, the study ignores a significant potential savings by the Sea Isle City District.

It also must be noted that several statements are made regarding the need to consider the impact on the Ocean City High School in any future plan involving Sea Isle City. While these statements are generally true, there is a significant exception as it relates to one of the options available to the Sea Isle City Public school. As a school of choice any student may attend the county vocational school without any consideration of the loss of revenue to Ocean City. If every student from Sea Isle City went to the county vocational school, Ocean City could not do anything about it.

Section IV, E, Table 22 was represented as reflecting the student enrollment, including Tuition Students, in all three scenarios. Since Sea Isle City would not be funding the cost of the Tuition Student's education in Ocean City or Middle Township, the savings displayed is understated.

Section IV, G, Analysis of Debt Service indicates a Long Range Facilities Plan projected cost of \$ 2,241,000. Little information is provided on details of this Plan. One would expect that a study to determine the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to operate the School would include a detailed analysis of the physical structure. Even a causal observation of the temporary buildings indicates significant problems with mold and deterioration of the structures. If there are studies relating to the physical condition and possible health issues of the physical plant, they should be released to the public as part on any discussion on the future of the school.

As noted in Section VI, F the district has the opportunity to engage in a broader concept of facility planning by considering joint school-community building projects. Such an approach makes sense in view of the projected decline of school age children in the City. Joint construction projects, to benefit both the school and city, should be considered. Two

examples immediately come to mind: the construction of a common library and a modern recreational center. Both facilities, if properly designed, could be converted into full time community centers if the school is closed in time due to low enrollment.

Summary

In Summary, our review of the Feasibility Study concludes:

1. The study failed to carry out the designated purpose of the Study by not considering all “other possible operating scenarios for the school district”.
2. There are instances of bias introduced into the Study. Examples include:
The omission of the complete academic and extracurricular program offerings by Middle Township,
The statement in Section A of the Summary of Advantages and Disadvantages that says: “Individuals interviewed as part of this study expressed a level of comfort and tradition with this relationship”. In fact, the SICTA representative who was interviewed as part of the Study expressed significant discomfort with the sending-receiving relationship with Ocean City.
3. The study fails to include critical financial information relative to the viability of the Sea Isle City district.
4. Options that were presented to the consultants, such as a jointure with the Avalon and Stone Harbor school districts and/or the Cape May County Vocational School were not explored nor considered.
5. The study fails to consider the pros and cons of the State Proposal that Cape May County be a pilot program in the establishment of a single county-wide school district.