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Schools

Scotland and Veterans Park on the Chopping Block

At a special Board of Education meeting, demographic consultants' projections showed closing a school could happen as early as 2014.

By Sarah Katz | [Email the author](#) | December 1, 2010 | [Print](#) | [18 Comments](#)

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With school enrollment projected to decline, closing a school is on the minds of the school board once again, and this time, it's Scotland Elementary School or Veterans Park Elementary School that is on the chopping block.

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Education Logistics, Inc. (Edulog), a consulting firm hired by the BOE to assist with enrollment projections and redistricting, presented their findings at a special Board of Education meeting on Tuesday night, and their recommendations showed that the two best scenarios for school closures would be Scotland in 2017 or Veteran's Park in 2015, or potentially even 2014.

Edulog's Joe O'Dell reviewed their comprehensive study based on data and criteria provided by the school district to a rather small audience of some board members and about ten community members.

O'Dell explained that Edulog selected Scotland and VP as the best options for various reasons, but mostly because closing one of those two schools would be the least disruptive to the fewest number of families in terms of redistricting.

"We like to move children that are neighbors together when we change our boundaries," O'Dell explained.

Because Scotland shares a campus with Barlow Mountain Elementary School, which holds special programs that would be difficult to move, Scotland was the better choice. Veterans Park was the other option because not only is it the smallest of all the six schools, but also because it is close in proximity to other schools.

Employing a cohort regression (survival) rather than a typical linear regression method, O'Dell said that they are able to look at any given year in the model. For example, using cohort regression means that they use last year's first grade enrollment to predict this year's second.

Though the methodologies are different, Edulog's historical projections are very close to those of Dr. Chung's projections, another demographer hired by the district, but show less of a decline than Dr. Chung's over the next ten years.

And though there will be a decline in overall numbers over the next decade, Edulog predicts that Farmingville's enrollment will actually increase every year over the next decade and Scotland will also increase in total enrollment, but at a slower pace.

The criteria supplied by the district centered around the BOE's "desired maximum class sizes," which is 20 students in grades K-1, 24 in grades 2, and 26 in grades 3-5. The district also supplied Edulog with the number of available classrooms so the consultants could calculate "maximum capacity" at each of the locations across the grades.

Edulog also created neighborhood "planning zones" so that they could understand not only how many children live in each neighborhood, but what grades they are all in so there is a more even distribution across the grades.

"Planning zones are used to better know where growth or decline is occurring," O'Dell said.

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From these planning zones, the demographers can create boundaries, and the methodology behind their decisions is based on overall capacity, class size, and the least amount of change to existing school boundaries.

Ridgefield's current K-5 enrollment, according to the criteria used by Edulog, is 383 students under capacity overall. Branchville is the closest to reaching full capacity, only 14 students under, while Ridgebury, the largest school in the district, is significantly under capacity by 147 students.

According to Edulog's model, if the district were to close Scotland, 2017 is the first year that no school would be over enrollment capacity. That is not to say, however, that the district cannot increase class sizes or create more classroom space.

In the case of the Veterans Park closure model, 2014 is the first year that no school would exceed enrollment capacity but seven additional classrooms would be needed, four of those at Branchville. However, Edulog recommends 2015 as the better year, as only one extra classroom would be needed at each school.

The final slide of the presentation recommended that Scotland and Veterans are the best choices in the year indicated "because that is the first year where no school is over the total optimal enrollment capacity (based on desired class size max)."

Board member John Palermo questioned the criteria, stating that some computer labs could be converted into classrooms for example, thus creating more space in some of the buildings.

"We are a lot closer to closing a school than 2017," Palermo said. "We've constrained them. We can increase capacity."

Superintendent Deb Low said that Edulog has the data to run different models, but thought this presentation was a good starting point for the Board to begin their discussions.

Former school board member Kathie McGerald, who was in the audience, asked O'Dell if there was any consideration given to middle schools districts when he performed his analysis.

She reminded everyone that there are several neighborhoods of Scotland children who are districted for East Ridge Middle School. O'Dell said this was not given to him as a criterion but he could certainly run a new model with feeder systems in mind.

The BOE plans to discuss this at their next regular meeting and they will see if they want to pay Edulog to run more granular models for them.

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COMMENTS (18)

Slmnc

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4:29pm on Wednesday, December 1, 2010

Why not consider sharing administrative and/or teaching resources between Scotland and Barlow - as mentioned they are on the same campus. Wouldn't this save some money without impacting the kids or the programs.

Log in to reply

acorn

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10:09pm on Wednesday, December 1, 2010

If a business had six sales offices around the country and the economy turned sour and they had to make some cutbacks by closing one of the sales offices, would they close the top producing office?

No. That would be silly. Why close your best asset?

So when a school district has six elementary schools and needs to make a cut, why touch Scotland? It's arguably the best elementary school in the district. It has the best test scores, the best after school enrichment program, and it won two national academic honors last year.

Shouldn't these facts be considered when choosing which school to close, instead of just looking at the impact for the bus routes?

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Slmnc

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4:24pm on Thursday, December 2, 2010

i really dont think its the school walls/buildings that make the difference..... but what happens between the walls - the students - teachers - curriculum - and those practices can be ported to another facility

No one is talking about removing students ... so following your analogy... if the best sales people cover the same accounts, have the same mgmt, and follow the same process, etc.. but move to a new office within the same town would you expect productivity to lower...

Ridgefield Mom

Flag as inappropriate

10:05am on Thursday, December 2, 2010

Good thoughts Acorn. This is why the Board of Education should actually start talking about the options. They have studied, studied, and studied some more. Now, let's see where people actually stand.

Are they willing to overcrowd the schools? We have one school (Branchville) that is already bursting, are they going to do that to the others schools as well? We need some redistricting NOW to get rid of the class size disparities amongst the schools.

Taking the computer labs to get another classroom at some of the locations might be a fine idea, but where will the kids get computers? If they are laptops that are brought to the classroom how much will they cost, how much will they cost to maintain, and will we have enough tech paras to work with them?

Let's get some concrete answers now that shows the Board of Ed, Board of Finance, and Board of Selectmen have put some real thought into this.

Log in to reply

acornb

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6:38pm on Thursday, December 2, 2010

No offense Slmnc, but don't really want to overanalyze the analogy. Point is, Scotland works. We should think twice about messing with it. If you were to be correct that the students/teachers/admin would be simply transplanted to a different brick and mortar location, I would agree with you, the learning dynamic would probably stay intact. But that's not what's slated to happen. If Scotland is closed, the framework would be sliced and diced, with groups of students and teachers going to different schools. Maybe over the past few years, these particular students and teachers have developed a mutual trust for each other, or maybe the principal has nurtured his teachers and they have responded by putting in the extra mile. What ever it is, it works. To break it apart and send everyone off in different directions could disrupt the symbiotic balance. Why risk it. In fact, hold onto it, study it, model it for the other schools. By the way, I'm not associated with Scotland School, so no bias on my part. I think they've done a great job and deserve extra consideration for their efforts.

Log in to reply

Slmnc

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10:09am on Saturday, December 4, 2010

acornb..

your analogy is accurate -- it just doesnt make same the point you thought it did.

My experience is that the kids & teachers do change EVERY who year, infact with the exception of a high school art class i don't recall a situation where me, or kids ever had the same teacher multiple years.

Students/Kids transfer schools all the time for various reasons and do fine - many even leverage the opportunity to do better, perhaps some dont .

Bottom line is Scotland is no better then any other school - its simply what happens between the walls - the students - teachers - curriculum. personally i would combine the schools and save on the admin and overhead costs.

acornc

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12:05pm on Saturday, December 4, 2010

We will have to agree to disagree about the impact of closing Scotland.

New topic you raise, combining Scotland and Barlow. There seems to be a misconception that combining Barlow and Scotland would save money. I don't think people are thinking this through

correctly. If a school needs one librarian for 400 students, then it would need two librarians for 800 students. If a school needs one nurse for 400 students, then it would need two nurses for 800 students. Where is the savings? Some people suggest we could have only one principal. People seem to think you can easily double the number of students and the principal will make do. Ever try to talk with an elementary school principal? Set up a 10 minute meeting and you will be interrupted 5 times. Issues arise. The principal is the only Administrator in the school allowed to handle these issues. Twice as many students means twice as many issues (or in fact more). Sure, you might be able to appoint a backup assistant principle, but what would that save, \$20,000? As much as I appreciate any and all savings, the \$20,000 would be wiped out simply with the cost of changing all the letterhead to say "Scarlow". There are much bigger fish to fry in the town and schools if you want to save real money.

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Slmnc

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12:49pm on Saturday, December 4, 2010

Fewer facilities means for the same amount of tax \$\$ more \$\$ can go to educating kids : and more directly to students - teachers - curriculum. -- the stuff between the walls...the real stuff a school is made of. The stuff that challenges, teaches, excites... frankly that's where Ridgefield is no better than most other areas were good but no better really. This is where the real difference in school systems is - that's where the \$\$ should go and that's what attracts families to school systems.

If a school needs one librarian for 400 students.....

If a school needs one nurse for 400 students.....

just because Ridgefield elementary schools do this doesn't make it "the best practice"

The physical configuration goal in my opinion should be to get to 4 elementary schools feeding into 2 middle schools feeding into one high school. This should be what we strive for, if different areas of town develop or the needs are not in balance then a decision should be made to redistrict for balance or build onto an existing facility BUT keep the number of facilities down to a minimum

Fewer facilities means more \$\$ go to educating kids : and more directly to students - teachers - curriculum

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Kelly Gels

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11:22am on Sunday, December 5, 2010

"Fewer facilities means more \$\$ go to educating kids : and more directly to students - teachers - curriculum"

Do you really think that if closing a school saves, say, 2 million dollars that that money will then be used elsewhere in the school budget???? As much as I'd like to think that is true as I have 3 children in the schools, I'm pretty sure the taxpayers are going to want to see some of this savings.

As far as Scotland is concerned, I have many friends who attend the school and they are all ridiculously happy with their principal, teachers, curriculum and overall atmosphere. While geographically it might make the most sense to close, I think it's worth looking into what makes it run so well before we think about closing it.

[Log in to reply](#)

Slmnc

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5:42pm on Sunday, December 5, 2010

If there's "magic" happening at Scotland it needs to be captured regardless of change in school configurations !

What I'm saying is that the size of the budget is not directly related to quality education, and the reason I say that is because facilities cost so much to run. Isn't most of the cost in the budget for facilities and teachers.

Teacher salary versus teaching quality would be another topic

acornd

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11:39am on Sunday, December 5, 2010

Slmnc, you are changing back to the original topic again, closing a school..

You say fewer facilities will save us money. I agree. In theory. But reality is something different. Ten years ago, pre-Bundle, you had a choice of six small schools, or say, three larger schools. The town

chose the smaller schools option. Unfortunately, you can't easily put that genie back into the bottle. You can't cry, "Do over, I now want the other option." What's done is done. The smaller schools have been built and we will be paying for them for the next 20 years.

To come along now and say you want to create a new hybrid solution of only a few SMALLER schools doesn't work. A few SMALLER schools is not an adequate substitute for the original option of a few LARGER schools. Doesn't work. Kids won't fit. "Oh", the crowd cries, "It will work if we get rid of computer labs...." Does it sound like a good idea to NOT teach computers? Do you think kids might need computer knowledge in the future? Do you think other towns are teaching kids about computers?

So what do we do? Close Scotland and build more classroom space at the remaining schools? More building as a way to save money? Please God no! (Can you believe we still have officially closed out the Bundle project!!)

We made our bed, now we must lie in it. Unfortunate. I hate it. But let's not make it worse by following one bad decision, the Bundle, with another bad decision, closing a school and cramming kids into closets.

[Log in to reply](#)

Slmnc

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6:08pm on Sunday, December 5, 2010

I do remember the bundle of course and was always in favor of expanding each existing school - my kids went to Farmingville at the time - you're right we can't undo that

On teaching computers : i actually don't think we need to teach that - but are you referring to teaching on/via computers - or teaching about computers ? i can't think of a kid who doesn't know how to use a computer, and i know a lot of people who never had elementary education in computers and are successful in the IT industry .

i for one would be much more interested in having students learn about world culture and personal finance - with what our country has been thru it amazes me that the state of Ct does not require at least a one semester class in personal finance - to learn how loans, insurance, mortgages, interest, credit cards , etc.. work . I have talked to our state representative about this. Perhaps it's too late for our generation but at least we should teach our kids to be fiscally knowledgeable.

Again what i'm saying is the focus and dedication of those activities between student and teacher within the walls of any building is what matters - and fewer facilities would allow for more of that focus.

Fewer larger buildings would allow for benefits also, more after school programs, more clubs, more diversity - I AM NOT TALKING ABOUT increasing class sizes, just have more classes in the same building

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colleen

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10:22am on Monday, December 6, 2010

As a newcomer to Ridgefield, could someone point me to any historical info on "the bundle" that I've heard mentioned several times?

Thanks.

[Log in to reply](#)

Karen Isaac

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11:41am on Monday, December 6, 2010

The "Bundle" was a 90-million dollar initiative passed in 2000 that resulted in building 2 new facilities - SRMS and the Rec Center, renovation to 5 elementary schools, ERMS and RHS and re-conversion of BMES back to an elementary school after years as the town recreation center.

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Michael Gibney

11:52am on Monday, December 6, 2010

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For more information, check out the following links:

--The PowerPoint slides from the Edulog presentation --

<http://www.ridgefield.org/site/files/finalpresentationresults.pdf>

--You can find a link to a video of the conference call from the district page --

<http://www.ridgefield.org/news/index.php#692>

Thank you. MG

[Log in to reply](#)

Historian

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12:45pm on Monday, December 6, 2010

In my opinion, the bundle was more than a large tax expense. It was a vain attempt to show the wealthier towns we were just like them. We were tired of being the poor cousin living inland to the north. We'll show them! We'll buy ourselves all these new things! How will we pay for these things? We'll put it on the charge card and let the next generation figure that out. The final results:

- Our taxes soared. We only live in one town at a time so in general we don't get to see and feel the taxes in other towns. We assume our taxes are like theirs, but they are not. We pay about 40% more than some other nearby towns.

- Our test scores fell. Funny thing, we spent all this money on the schools. An underlying assumption was that it would help the kids get better grades and be more successful. Didn't work that way. Data shows our test scores fell as did other academic measures. I think the explanation is simple, put a kid in a dingy room with only a mathbook. He has the choice of staring at the blank walls or opening the book. Many chose the book. But after the bundle, the choices changed. Mathbook or play with all the new gadgets. Electric pottery wheels, a water slide for the pool, fabled student kitchens with granite counter tops, and the crown jewel, Tiger Hollow. What would you do as a kid, read the mathbook or take a jog with your friends around the new rubberized track? As test scores fell over this past decade, sports enrollment doubled.

That's the bundle.

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Karen Isaac

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2:19pm on Tuesday, December 7, 2010

" As test scores fell over this past decade, sports enrollment doubled."
Can you provide any data that clearly links the two?

Slmnc

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1:12pm on Tuesday, December 7, 2010

".....As test scores fell over this past decade, sports enrollment doubled....."

if this is really true is says a lot .

sports and activities are important - very important, but in my opinion a secondary priority to learning / educating / training the adults of tomorrow

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