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Antioch schools may address aging infrastructure

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Antioch School District 34 is considering eliminating portable classrooms and changing how many years young students spend at their first schools.

The change to neighborhood schools would mean students spend kindergarten through fifth grade at the same school instead of spending preschool through first grade at Hillcrest Elementary School, then switching to one of three other elementary schools for the next three grades.

School staff would have more time to engage with students, learn their needs and understand their education level before moving on, something research shows leads to better outcomes in both academics and social skills, Antioch School District 34 Superintendent Jay Marino said.

"The greatest thing from a parent's perspective is the reduced bus times, especially for our littlest students," board President Tamara Neumann said. "I think that will be one of the most important things that families will notice from the beginning, and of course that will save us money in transportation."

The transition, though, will not address the district's aging infrastructure and reliance on 16 portable classroom trailers, Marino said.

That is where a referendum to pay for additions to Oakland Elementary School and W.C. Petty Elementary School could come in, Marino said.

He said a vote is planned on whether to hire an architecture firm to take the ideas to the next level.

The firm would assess whether the district has enough capacity at three of its elementary school buildings to house all kindergartners through fifth-graders. If not, the firm will determine what needs to be done and how much it would cost, Marino said.

The board isn't going to implement any plans until it's confident they will be successful, which could take a couple of years, Marino said.

The board also plans on putting together a committee of staff, teachers, community members and parents to help as it puts together a master facilities plan, Neumann said.

Hillcrest Elementary School could potentially house about 150 additional students, and moving preschool out of the building would also open up some rooms, Marino said. An addition of about 10 classrooms to Oakland and W.C. Petty could possibly eliminate the need for the mobile classrooms.

The board is also considering asking voters for the funds to build a gymnasium at the two schools, as the cafeteria doubles as both, causing scheduling problems and limiting what the schools can do.

As the district's oldest building, Antioch Elementary School didn't make sense as an investment, and so the board is considering repurposing the building and perhaps housing its early childhood program there or partnering with the village, which has its own program, Marino said.

Leaving the building in place would provide a short-term solution if the district's enrollment climbs unexpectedly, he said.

The board has earmarked about \$4.5 million over several years for work and has some bonds coming off the books in a few years, Marino said.

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