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City schools unveil 10-year renovation plan Twenty-six buildings to close; more than 100 to be rehabbed

By Erica L. Green, The Baltimore Sun 11:38 PM EST, November 27, 2012

In the next 10 years, Baltimore's school system will have a leaner, modernized look under a proposed \$2.4 billion facilities plan that calls for closing 26 school buildings and upgrading 136 others in a large-scale face-lift of Maryland's oldest school infrastructure.

The plan, announced by CEO Andre's Alonso on Tuesday, would orchestrate the relocation of some schools to different buildings; others would cease to exist.

The first schools affected are four recommended to close at the end of the current school year: Baltimore Rising Star Academy, Garrison Middle, Patapsco Elementary/Middle, and William C. March Middle.

"There will be many difficult decisions, but all will place students in better buildings than they are in today," Alonso said in a news conference attended by the mayor and other political leaders. "Big picture: The plan is right for kids and necessary to take their progress to the next level."

The revamped system will allow for a more efficient use of space, Alonso said, adding that "every single one of those buildings will be equal to the need of our students."

But as news spread across the city, parents and educators in schools that could face closures grappled with the uncertainty of their students' futures.

"I'm totally shocked," said Dana Jones-Hines, who has a junior and a freshman at Northwestern High School, which is recommended for closing in 2015-2016. "I had anticipated my kids graduating from here. I am just mind-boggled right now."

The school board is expected to vote on the 10-year plan in January, and will also have to approve any school closures slated in a given year.

School board members who attended the news conference held at Calvin M. Rodwell Elementary School -- a school at 119 percent of its rated capacity and slated for a renovation -- supported the plan.

Board President Neil Duke said that the plan's announcement wasn't the time to "take a victory lap." "A decade is too long," Duke said. "We have to hustle, folks."

"This is a day of reckoning," echoed School Board Commissioner Bob Heck. "This is our shot. There's no question about that."

The four schools recommended for 2012-2013 closures had building utilization rates between 20 percent and 50 percent, and have also struggled academically, school officials said. Fewer than 1,000 students will be affected by this year's proposed closures, officials said, and teachers will be shifted around to accommodate students who disperse to different schools next year.

The view from Garrison

As students and staffers at Garrison Middle School poured out of the building into a chilly afternoon after the final bell at 4:05, the community was just starting to digest the news.

Debra Powell, a special education paraprofessional, said the news shocked and unnerved her a bit -- she's two years from retirement and expected to finish her career at Garrison. Still, it wasn't a complete surprise.

Since joining the staff a year and a half ago, she'd heard rumors this might be coming. "I guess I just didn't believe it would ever really happen," she said.

Powell was guardedly positive about the choice of Garrison. Although she said it is much safer than in the 1980s, when her nephews attended it, she also said it lacks the variety of after-school programs that students deserve.

"If [the closing] ends up giving them more opportunities, we have to accept it and move on," said Powell, who expects to be assigned to another school next year. "We have to be sure that their education continues so they can reach the goals they have."

Officials and advocates said the sacrifices that school communities face will mean facilities better suited to serve students in the 21st century -- from basics such as drinking water and temperature control to state-of-the-art amenities like technology hubs and culinary kitchens.

"There are not many moments in your life when you realize you are standing on the edge of something great," said Sherelle Savage, a parent advocate with the Baltimore Education Coalition, who spoke through tears at the news conference.

She said her "budding artist" and her "chef in the making" lack the facilities to hone their skills in their schools. Her youngest son, she said, is among the lucky

students in his school because his classroom's windows open." Our buildings are in crisis," Savage said.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake lauded the plan as a "tremendous day for our schools," saying it built upon the legacy of her late father, a former state delegate and dogged champion for education.

"The decisions that have to be made to close some schools are going to be rough all around," Rawlings-Blake said. "Everyone has an emotional attachment, a historic attachment, but we have to have a stronger attachment to these [students]."

The mayor, who proposed a controversial bottle tax that was passed by the City Council and stands to raise \$10 million for school construction, also said she believes the school system's blueprint was a critical step toward securing financial backing at the state level for the plan.

In the last General Assembly session, lawmakers stopped short of passing a bill that sought to use a state-guaranteed stream of \$32 million a year in the form of a "block grant" to underwrite bonds for a major construction program. Instead the legislature ordered a study of school construction by the 2013 legislative session.

"We couldn't go to Annapolis and say, 'Give me,'" Rawlings-Blake said. "This [10-year plan] talks about not just where we are, but where we can be."

The school system commissioned a \$1 million study to document every nook and cranny of its facilities. The so-called "Jacobs Report," released this past spring, detailed a \$2.5 billion need and 50 schools that had to be shut down or rebuilt.

Under the new plan, by 2025 the school system would ensure that it was utilizing at least 77 percent of its space -- rather than its current usage of 65 percent -- by shrinking the district as a whole from 163 buildings to 137. The new configuration could accommodate 105,620 students, well over the system's 85,000 current student body.

The school buildings slated for closure encompass 12 programs that will be relocated, and 17 that will cease to exist.

State lawmakers and the city's advocacy community vowed to support efforts in Annapolis to secure funds for the plan.

Del. Curt Anderson, who heads the city delegation, said that securing funding for the project was the "No. 1 priority for every delegate, every senator in Baltimore City."

He said that for the past four years, advocates mobilized by the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland have "shamed some legislators to make sure that education is the No. 1 priority."

"It shouldn't have to be that way," Anderson said. "But we're going to have to shame some legislators from other areas, let them know where we stand. We stand behind our kids."

Bebe Verdery, director of education reform for the state's ACLU chapter, called the plan a "milestone" for the school system. She said that the new proposal held more promise than previous ones because, "when plans have been written in the past, there was no strategy to implement it."

Verdery also said she believes that when lawmakers across the state understand the magnitude of the city's needs and plan of action, they will warm to the plan. "Once legislators from other counties understand that the block grant is the only way city schools are ever going to get new buildings, and it does no harm to their jurisdictions, and could be a model for their counties that also have facilities needs, they'll support it," she said.

The ACLU launched the school system's plan of action after it released a 2010 report that for the first time put a price tag -- \$2.8 billion -- on the system's facilities needs. It also offered creative financing solutions that had been used in other parts of the country.

The immediate crunch

City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke said the new plan is the right move to get what the city needs. Clark said she was "already thinking ahead" about how to use some of the buildings so their programs wouldn't be lost.

"The most important part of the plan is to produce 100 percent functional and effective schools," said Clarke, who chairs the council's Education Committee.

"The negative part of the process is we have to reduce our capacity," she said. "We've been through this before. It is not an easy process or a happy process. It is very painful. In most cases, it's painful. We can't be spending [billions] unless our school facilities are at capacity."

At William C. March Middle School in East Baltimore, one of the schools targeted to close next June, parents waiting to pick up their children at the end of the school day said they didn't know about the closing.

Students were given a letter about the school system's 10-year plan to show their parents. Several parents interviewed in the parking lot said they weren't in favor of the closing.

Robert Epps of Lafayette Avenue, the parent of Keondra, who is in the eighth grade, said he likes the school because of its location and doesn't believe it should be closed.

"It's good for the kids in this area," he said. "They don't have far to walk. The kids are learning. I don't know why they are closing."

Beginning Saturday, the school system will hold a series of information sessions to get feedback from the community, and to hear parents' concerns.

The Baltimore Education Coalition has planned an Annapolis rally on Feb. 25 to support the plan.

Bishop Douglas Miles, a founding member of the coalition and co-chair of Baltimore United in Leadership Development, urged the city to recognize a "historic moment."

"In biblical terms, a Kairos moment, where there's a perfect confluence of events, of people, and of circumstances that Baltimore has never had in regard to its school system," he said. "Never before have we vowed to make such an investment in the lives of Baltimore students. This is long overdue."

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