

Facilities Study Summary—Unatego Central School District 2016

Background Information

In the summer of 2015, the Unatego School District faced declining student enrollment and continuing financial distress. The Board of Education was also conducting the 'Building Conditions Survey' which is required every five years by the State of New York. At this time, the Board unanimously agreed to hire the consulting firm Castallo and Silky, and commissioned them to develop a facilities study to determine the best options for the district's future operations. The study, completed over the course of the 2015-2016 school year, was led by Dr. William Silky and Mr. Alan Pole, two distinguished educators with many years experience in conducting similar studies throughout the state. What follows is a summary of their findings and recommendations for Unatego. The report in its entirety is available on line at <http://www.unatego.org/Downloads/FinalReport%204716.pdf>.

The consultants made use of a 17-member advisory committee which included district administrators, teachers, and support staff as well as community members, parents, and local leaders. The advisory committee provided guidance to the consultants throughout the process and helped frame the study. Neither the Superintendent nor Board members took active roles on this committee, although they often observed the meetings.

Focus of the Study

The main focus of the study was to determine if there was a better way to organize the district's facilities in light of declining enrollment and continued financial distress. The Administration and the Board asked the consultants to address two "critical questions" in the study:

First, is there a better way, both educationally and fiscally, to reconfigure the grades in order to provide a sound instructional program now and in the future and

Second: how should the grades and facilities be arranged?

In order to answer these critical questions, the consultants and the committee examined student enrollment, population trends, building organization, building conditions, staffing, transportation, and finance. Using this information, the consultants developed several possible options for the committee to consider. This led to a series of recommendations for the Board of Education to consider as it develops a plan for the future. The consultant's final report is an important element of the materials the Board will consider as it makes its decisions. The remainder of this summary will be divided into these key areas and findings of the consultants, assisted by the advisory committee.

Enrollment History and Population Trends

The current enrollment in the District is 895 students in grades K-12. The average cohort for each grade level is approximately 69 students, ranging from a high of 85 in 9th grade to a low of 58 in 4th grade. This compares to 1042 students in the 2010-2011 school year, a decrease of 147 students or 14.1%. Perhaps more importantly, the study projects enrollment will continue to

decline to 772 students by the 2022-2023 school year, resulting in average grade levels of less than sixty, with graduating classes in the 45-50 range.

The District currently uses three buildings for instruction which are set up according to the 'Princeton Plan.' Grades K-2 are housed in Otego, grades 3-5 in Unadilla, and grades 6-8 share the Junior-Senior High School building with 9-12 graders. The current configuration was brought about several years ago as both a cost-saving measure and to ensure consistency of instruction and curriculum for each grade level.

As the consultants note in Chapter 5, declining enrollment is not surprising given population trends in the area. Although the area has experienced a modest decline in population over the past several years, more important for the purposes of this study is the demographics of the remaining population. The critical age for childbearing and childrearing is between 25-44; it is this age group that has been declining consistently over the past 16 years. Countering the decline in this age group, the numbers in the age groups between 45 and 64 and 65 and over have continued to increase.

Building Use and Organization

As noted previously, the current grade level configuration in the District is K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. The consultants, with the committee, then examined the use of available space in each building in the District.

Otego, constructed in 1933, currently houses approximately 213 students. Unadilla Elementary, built in 1935, is home to 185 students, while the Junior-Senior High School, opened in 1967, houses 497 students in grades 6-12. The study next looked at space utilization in each building.

Otego, with approximately 35,000 square feet, has 21 full size rooms in addition to several smaller rooms used for the health office and counseling office. Otego also has a recently renovated gym/auditorium, a cafeteria, a library, music rooms, and an art room. According to the study, all the classrooms in Otego are currently being used, with 12 being used for regular classrooms and 9 used for such purposes as Special Education, Academic Intervention, Computer Room, Occupational Therapy/Physical Therapy, Speech/ESL, and a Faculty Room. There is very little empty space in the building.

Unadilla is a much larger building, consisting of over 63,000 square feet, and it does have some under-utilized spaces. Like Otego, Unadilla has a gymnasium, a cafeteria, library, music and art rooms, as well as a large multi-purpose room. With a larger area, Unadilla has 26 full size classrooms, nine of which are being used for regular classroom instruction. The other 17 full size classrooms are being used for various student services: Special Education, PT, OT, Computer lab, and Academic Intervention. Currently each of the four Licensed Teaching Assistants (LTAs) meet with small groups of students in a full size classroom; one classroom is used as a faculty room, and one as a study hall. The remaining four full size rooms are used for storage or are empty. Unadilla also has several smaller rooms, including a conference room, a work room, a speech room, a music lesson room, the primary library, and a lounge.

The Junior-Senior High School, at nearly 140,000 square feet, is by far the largest building in the District. There are 53 full size classrooms, with 30 being used for core academic instruction. The other 23 are used for Special Education, business, computer labs, Health Education, Technology, a Testing Center, computer storage, board room, and faculty room. Currently 4 classrooms are empty. In addition to 3 gymnasiums (HS, MS, and Corrective) there are also a

cafeteria, a large auditorium, 2 music rooms, and 2 art rooms. Smaller spaces include a weight room, a health office, a tech lab, and lunch detention room. The remaining space is devoted to District, Middle, and High School offices, with space for counselors, secretarial staff, school board, and administrators.

The consultants noted much under-utilized space in both Unadilla and the Jr. / Sr. High School; in addition to the empty rooms, many full size rooms are being used for small group instruction that does not need the space afforded by a large classroom.

Building Condition Survey

Every five years, the State of New York requires school districts to complete a "Building Condition Survey," which determines the current condition of all buildings in the district, recommendations for remediation, and cost estimates for any necessary work. The following list of the needs of the District's three buildings, plus the bus garage, draws from that survey.

Otego Elementary (1931): \$4,200,000. Major items that need to be addressed in this building include replacement of the original septic system, repointing exterior walls, replacing water damaged ceilings, improving ADA accessibility, upgrading the communications and fire alarm systems, and replacing lighting throughout the building.

Unadilla Elementary: (1934) \$3,721,000. Items that need attention include replacement of the original septic system, replacement of sidewalks, wall caps and re-flash roofing on the parapet, ceiling replacement, plumbing upgrades, ADA accessibility upgrades, providing an area of fire rescue, electric upgrades, and improvements to the communications and fire alarm systems.

Jr. Sr. High School: (1967) \$8,010,000: Some of the major repairs necessary include repaving the parking lot, foundation and masonry repair, replacing a roof, updating the HVAC systems, new ductwork and piping, and upgrading the interior electric distribution system as well as communications upgrades and replacing the fire alarm system.

Bus Garage: (1950) \$317,000: Items in need of upgrading or repair include replacement of the overhead doors, upgrading fire alarm and CO detectors, improving ADA accessibility, and electrical upgrades.

Total Repairs for All Buildings: \$16,248,000.

Note: The Board of Education's Building and Grounds Committee met with the district's architects and administration and recommended that some items on the BCS be given priority status. The cost of the priority items on the BCS are shown below.

Priority Work at Otego Elementary:	\$2,419,000
Priority Work at Unadilla Elementary:	\$1,872,000
Priority Work Jr-Sr High School:	\$4,429,000

It should be noted that not all work listed in the Building Condition Survey needs to be done right away, and that some of the repairs/maintenance items are cosmetic rather than structural. It should also be noted that the cost of recommended remediation at the two elementary schools totals \$7,921,000. When done, the buildings would still be nearly 90 years old.

Staffing, Transportation, and Finance

In light of a worsening financial condition and faced with a declining enrollment, the District has eliminated multiple teaching and support positions. If a decision was made to close one of the two elementary schools, the consultants contend that there would be significant savings from additional staff cuts totaling approximately \$391,000 annually. There would be an additional savings of approximately \$35 to \$40 thousand in utility costs, although should the district retain a closed building, it would still have to maintain the structure, having to pay \$53-\$60,000 annually in utility costs for an empty building.

After the grade level reconfiguration, transportation problems ensued. A shuttle bus system is now employed to transfer students among buildings prior to the ordinary dismissal times. The committee heard from administrators and parents that this results in the loss of approximately 30 minutes of available classroom time per day in the two elementary schools. When calculated for an entire school year, this constitutes nearly 13 days of lost instructional time. Committees have met to try to solve this problem to no avail. The consultants' report proposes that the problem would be eliminated if all students were concentrated in one building.

Despite cost-cutting measures, the District continues to suffer from the fiscal stress brought on by several years of state aid cuts and the imposition of a "2%" tax cap. At the end of the 2013-2014 fiscal year, the District's unrestricted fund balance was approximately \$240,000. At 1.26% of total budget, this fund balance is considerably lower than the recommended and allowable 4%. Moreover, the District has no reserves to fall back on.

Options for Maintaining and/or Reorganizing the Building/Grade Level Organization

Based on the data collected, the consultants developed four feasible options for the District to consider going forward. There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these options. The four options are summarized below.

Option 1: In this scenario, the District would leave the grade configurations unchanged, keeping K-2 students in Otego, 3-5 in Unadilla, and 6-12 at the Jr.-Sr. High School. The primary advantages would be having no empty school buildings and no disruption of the status quo. Disadvantages include loss of potential financial savings, continued loss of instructional time in both elementary schools due to the transportation issue, and the prospect of continuing to provide ongoing maintenance and repairs to both aging elementary buildings.

Option 2: As suggested by the consultants and the advisory committee, this option would close the Otego building (by far the smaller of the two elementary schools), move all students in grades K-2 to Unadilla, and move the 5th graders to the Middle School. Disadvantages would include having to maintain or re-purpose Otego Elementary, and the loss of a school to the Otego

community, with the potential to lower property values in that village. The Advisory Committee also expressed concerns about the propriety of having 5th graders in a building with older students. Advantages listed include making better use of excess capacity in existing buildings, potentially significant financial savings, more opportunities for teacher collaboration, and elimination of the shuttle bus system, thereby providing more instructional time for the students.

Option 2b: A second option was developed later in the process, called Option 2b. In this case, the 5th graders would remain in Unadilla, and it would become a K-5 building. The advantage here would be that 5th graders would remain in a more age-appropriate setting, with the primary disadvantage being that it left the District little room for expansion, particularly in the event that financial circumstances allowed the addition of Pre-Kindergarten at some point in the future.

Option 3: This option suggests closing both elementary schools and building a new state-of-the-art elementary school on the main campus in Wells Bridge. The disadvantages listed included maintaining two vacant buildings as well as the cost of constructing a new building. The primary advantage is that this option would provide students with a 21st century building in which to learn. An estimate from the District's architects anticipate such a structure would cost approximately \$18 to 20 million before state aid, leaving a local share of the cost at approximately \$2.9 to 3.2 million.

Option 4: Close Unadilla Elementary and move 3-4 grades to Otego with 5th grade moving to the Middle School. While there were advantages listed supporting this option, due to a variety of factors it was declared unfeasible by both the consultants and Advisory Committee and was not considered in the final recommendations.

Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

Key Findings: *District enrollment has declined and is projected to continue to decline. In light of this declining enrollment, there is excess capacity in district buildings, primarily in Unadilla and at the Jr.-Sr. High School. Elementary students are losing valuable instructional time due to the current shuttle bus system. Although there is considerable community support for education at Unatego, the district is in very poor financial condition.*

Other key findings included noting that *it could take over \$16 million to do necessary repairs and renovations at the District's three existing buildings, and it would cost more than \$18 million to construct a new elementary school on the high school campus.* Although there is a chance the District could sell, lease, or otherwise repurpose the existing elementary schools, it is unlikely that this would bring anywhere near the appraised valuations. Closing one elementary school would result in more than \$400,000 in annual savings, primarily from staffing cuts and lowered utility costs. Options 2 or 3 would have negligible impact on transportation costs, although the District would need to find one or more new drivers.

It was also noted that *there would be a tax benefit* to both towns in the District if an elementary school was closed and all elementary students were consolidated to one building. Although there would be increased capital debt if the District chose to build a new elementary school, the consultants felt that with prudent fiscal planning this would not necessarily impact local taxes.

Conclusions: The consultants concluded by repeating the key questions noted at the beginning of the study: First, is there a better way, educationally and fiscally, to reconfigure the grades to provide a sound instructional program now and in the future? If so, how should the grades and facilities be arranged? The consultants concluded that there was a better way, both educationally and fiscally, to reconfigure grades to provide high quality instruction, and that only one of the options considered provides that solution.

Recommendations: Since the consultant's recommendations are key focus of the study, they are listed here in their entirety rather than as a summary.

- It is recommended that, effective with the 2017-18 school year, the Otego Elementary School be closed and that grades K-2 should be moved from Otego Elementary to the Unadilla Elementary School.
- It is further recommended that, upon closing the Otego Elementary School, the school district should implement the staffing savings identified in this study using attrition.
- It is further recommended that the district secure voter approval to establish a capital reserve account at its earliest convenience.
- It is further recommended that the district fund its capital reserve account with the monies that are saved from the staffing reductions above, with any reductions in the district's debt service and any other surplus funds that are generated at the end of the fiscal year.
- It is further recommended that the district convene a facilities planning committee whose role it will be to develop a long term facilities plan for the district including the design of a new elementary school to be located on the middle/high school campus.
- It is further recommended that the Unadilla Elementary School be closed in the same year that the new elementary school is ready for use.
- It is further recommended that the district should immediately explore the possible sale and/or leasing of the Otego Elementary School and for the Unadilla Elementary School at such time as the new elementary school is ready for use.
- It is further recommended that the 5th grade remain in the Unadilla Elementary School. Given that the number of elementary grade sections may change in the future, should the district receive funding and be in a position of establishing a Pre-K programs, decisions about the location of the Pre-K program and the 5th grade should be made at that time.⁶