

TO: Elizabeth School District Board of Education
FROM: Elizabeth School District Administration
MEETING: February 24, 2020 Regular Board Work Session **UPDATED 3/9/20**
RE: Recommendation regarding Frontier High School

It is the administration's recommendation that the Elizabeth Board of Education,

- 1) Authorize the closure of Frontier High School after the completion of the current school year,
- 2) Authorize the Elizabeth High School Principal to review and approve the transfer of credits earned at Frontier High School towards the Elizabeth High School graduation requirements for any current Frontier student who enrolls at Elizabeth High School next school year, and
- 3) Direct the administration to develop and present for board consideration a proposal for the process to sell the Frontier High School property.

Basis for Recommendation

The Frontier program is financially unsustainable.

The Frontier building is at the end of its useful life as a school.

In May of 2009, the Elizabeth Board of Education passed a "Resolution Regarding Frontier High School." The resolution established a framework for future financial feasibility that essentially consisted of a balanced operating budget. Through the years of the recession beginning at the turn of the decade, and later significant state-wide reductions in public school funding, all other Elizabeth schools made substantial cuts to their operating expenses, totaling millions of dollars. Most of the cuts were to staff.

During this period, no such cuts were made at Frontier High School. The educational model and number of staff at Frontier remained consistent for almost a decade. The only minor change was converting two full-time office positions to part-time positions. The district absorbed cuts in other areas while preserving the integrity of the Frontier model. This enabled the school to successfully meet the needs of students who enrolled and persisted at the school.

Despite repeated and meaningful attempts to maintain the financial viability of the school, the trend over the last three years has been the increasingly unsustainable fiscal health of the school.

In addition to the operating imbalance, the facility itself is at the end of its useful life as a school. In depth studies done in 2013 and in 2018 concurred in their analysis that the building should be vacated for use as a school. Investing hundreds of thousands of dollars, or millions, in the facility for a school that is not economically viable is not prudent.

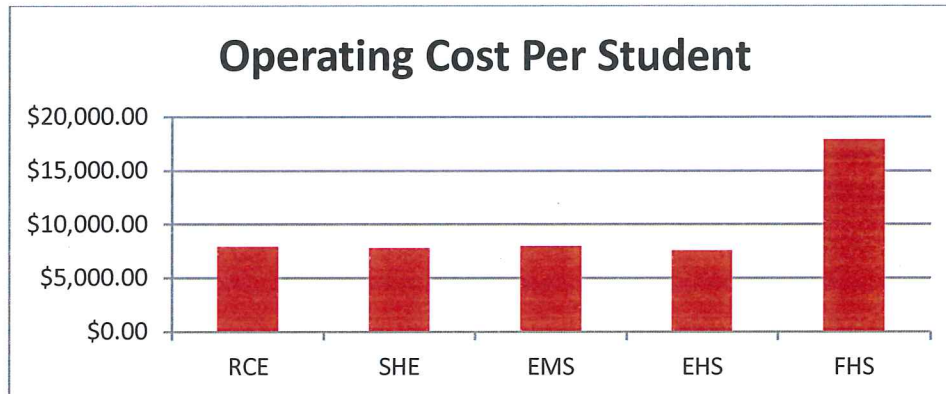
After finalizing the official 2019-20 October count data and submitting it to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), district and school administrators began focused discussions about the future of Frontier's program and the facility. Discussions included Frontier High School principal Rob McMullen, Elizabeth High School principal Bret McClendon, special services director Kim Morrison, chief financial officer Ron Patera, human resources director Kin Shuman, and superintendent Douglas Bissonette. Before becoming a principal in Kansas, Mr. McClendon was a teacher in an alternative school co-located in a larger comprehensive high school. His understanding of the needs of alternative students as they relate to Elizabeth High School has been very helpful.

The most promising options were fully considered, including moving the school to a different location, locating the school inside a section of Elizabeth High School, and transforming the structure and format of the school into a program at Elizabeth High School. None of the options were determined to be both academically and economically viable.

Operational Considerations

- Based on \$699,314, the original operating budget for FHS that was adopted for the 2019-2020 school year, and the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) October count of Frontier students, the per pupil operating cost to run the program is \$17,931. While the balance of the schools run between \$7,584 per student at EHS to \$8,029 per student at EMS, with SHE and RCE in between those two levels.
- The district receives approximately \$8,395 per student through the school finance act. The district must allocate an additional \$9,500, approximately, for each student currently enrolled in Frontier. This is more than double the cost per student at the other schools in the district.

- Cost per student graph follows:



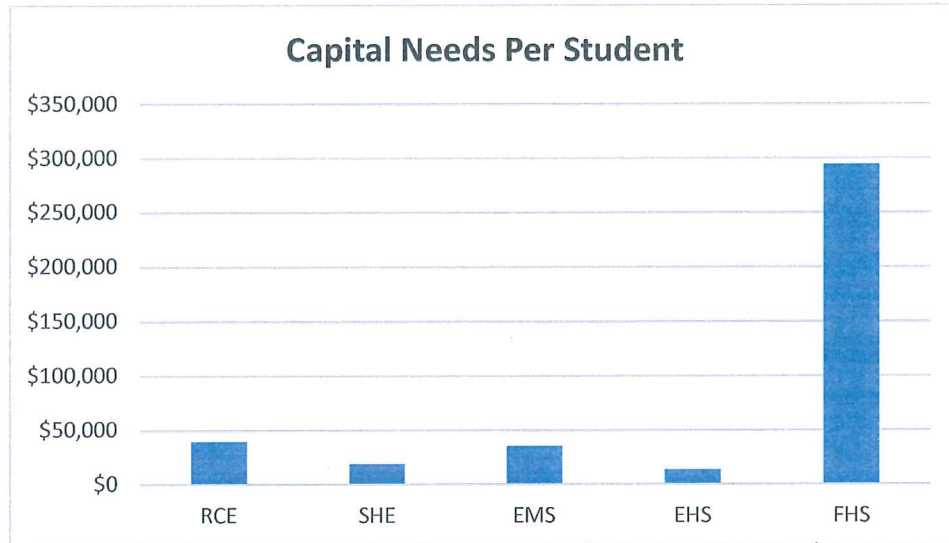
- Cost per student calculation follows (rounded to nearest dollar):

RCE	Expenses	2,371,984
	Students (FTE)	298
	Cost per Student	7,960
SHE	Expenses	2,819,123
	Students (FTE)	360
	Cost per Student	7,831
EMS	Expenses	3,243,600
	Students (FTE)	404
	Cost per Student	8,029
EHS	Expenses	4,975,179
	Students (FTE)	656
	Cost per Student	7,584
FHS	Expenses	699,314
	Students (FTE)	39
	Cost per Student	17,931

Sources: 2019-2020 Adopted District Budget
2019 CDE October Count

Capital Considerations

- According to the Facilities Master Plan created in 2018, the cost to bring the Frontier building up to its original condition for educational use would be \$11,493,592. Allocating this cost on a per pupil basis would average \$294,707. While the balance of the schools would be from \$39,473 at RCE to \$13,592 at EHS. The following graph illustrates this comparison:



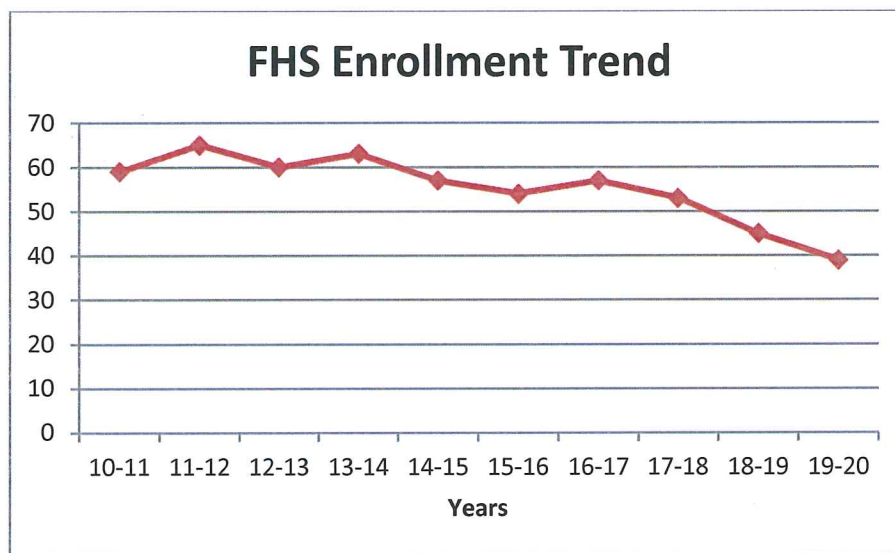
- The following calculations illustrate the breakdown between the schools (rounded to the nearest dollar):

RCE	Capital Needs	11,762,864
	Students (FTE)	298
	Cost per Student	39,473
SHE	Capital Needs	6,950,218
	Students (FTE)	360
	Cost per Student	19,306
EMS	Capital Needs	14,348,753
	Students (FTE)	404
	Cost per Student	35,517
EHS	Capital Needs	8,916,311
	Students (FTE)	656
	Cost per Student	13,592
FHS	Capital Needs	11,493,592
	Students (FTE)	39
	Cost per Student	294,707

Sources: 2018 Facilities Master Plan
2019 CDE October Count

Enrollment trends

- From 2010 to 2014, enrollment remained fairly static. It began to decline in the 2014-2015 school year. From the 2013-2014 year to the current school year, there has been a 38% drop in enrollment, to the current enrollment of 39 students. To reverse this trend, the district has increased the marketing of this facility and this year changed the school week from five days to four days. This was done to attract more students to a choice school. However, enrollment has dropped again, forcing the district to increase the operational subsidy of this school. A graph illustrating this enrollment drop follows:



Source: CDE October Pupil Counts

- Enrollment to attend Frontier High School is based upon an application and interview process. Students residing in other school districts are accepted, space permitting. Current enrollment consists almost exclusively of district residents.

Graduation

One of the most important priorities in considering the recommendation to close Frontier was the future of the students who do not graduate from the school this May. It is estimated that up to 20 current students could graduate from Frontier in May 2020. Of the 19 or so students who do not graduate, some are very close to graduation. It should be noted that one of the benefits of Frontier is that students graduate once their credit requirements are met, and that can happen mid-year or mid-semester.

In order to allow current Frontier students who transfer to Elizabeth High School next semester to continue on their path toward graduation, we propose the EHS principal be authorized to grant credit for classes completed at Frontier towards Elizabeth High School graduation requirements. The principal will base his decisions on a review of records and other considerations such as conversations with Frontier teachers and EHS counselors.

Advising and other support for Frontier students

Frontier staff regularly meet with their students to monitor progress, provide advice and support and help motivate the students. If a decision were made to close the school, the Frontier staff would personally meet with each student not graduating in May, and their parents if they wish, and assist each student in determining the best path forward in their education.

Colorado has many “choice” laws, giving students and their parents a wide variety of educational options. The most significant of these is the Public Schools of Choice law that allows resident students to enroll at schools in any Colorado district for which they are not zoned. This is also referred to as Open Enrollment. The law allows nonresidents to enroll students in any Colorado school without paying tuition when state and district guidelines are followed.

If students decide to enroll (or re-enroll) at Elizabeth High School, teachers, counselors, and administration will make every effort to support them in achieving their academic and post-secondary goals, whether it’s further education or entering the workforce.

Opportunity Program and ASPIRE Program

The district provides two Special Service programs for identified students, the Opportunity Program for 6-12 grade students and the ASPIRE program for 18-21 year old students. Both of these programs use the Frontier facility. These services are required by law and serve a small number of students. These programs and services will continue to be provided by the district locally, at a place yet to be determined. Staffing and current educational practices will remain the same. The only change will be location.

Frontier Staff Transition

As a result of the recommended closure of Frontier High School and the Frontier school building, it is the intent of the district to place current Frontier staff in similar or substantially similar positions within the district for the 2020-2021 school year. To that end the Human Resources Department will provide the following support to current Frontier staff who desire to remain with the district:

1. The Human Resources Director will maintain a list of Frontier employees who wish to remain with the district;
2. Assistance will be offered to Frontier employees for the application and interview process to include completion of applications, resume development and interviewing skills;
3. Frontier employees will be made aware of similar positions which become available due to resignations, retirements or non-renewals, and will be invited to apply for those positions;
4. Priority will be given to Frontier employees to be interviewed and considered for a vacant position prior to consideration being given to other applicants for the position. The final decision regarding a selection to fill the vacancy will be made by the appropriate principal or department director;
5. If a suitable position vacancy does not occur, the district will explore other employment options for current Frontier employees.

Other Organizations/Programs Using the Frontier Building

There are a few non-profit organizations serving area youth that occupy space in the Frontier building. These organizations will need to relocate to a different space if the school is closed.

Elizabeth School District provides a two-week Summer School immediately after the conclusion of the regular school year in order for students to earn credit for classes they did not pass during the school year. That program would still be offered in the summer of 2020.

Elizabeth Middle School and Elizabeth Parks and Recreation routinely use the gymnasium at Frontier through most of the calendar year. It is not clear how long after the school year the gymnasium could continue to be used. This is a topic needing further investigation.

Other community organizations, like the Boys Scouts, use the building for meetings through the board's Facilities Use Policy. In principle, all facility use by outside organizations would likely need to cease sometime soon after closure of the building.

The district has an agreement with Legacy Academy to provide hot lunches to students at Legacy. These lunches are currently prepared at the kitchen in Frontier High School and transported to Legacy. If Legacy wishes to continue contracting with the district to provide school lunches for the 2020-21 School Year, the two organizations will need to re-evaluate the conditions of the current contract.

Conclusion

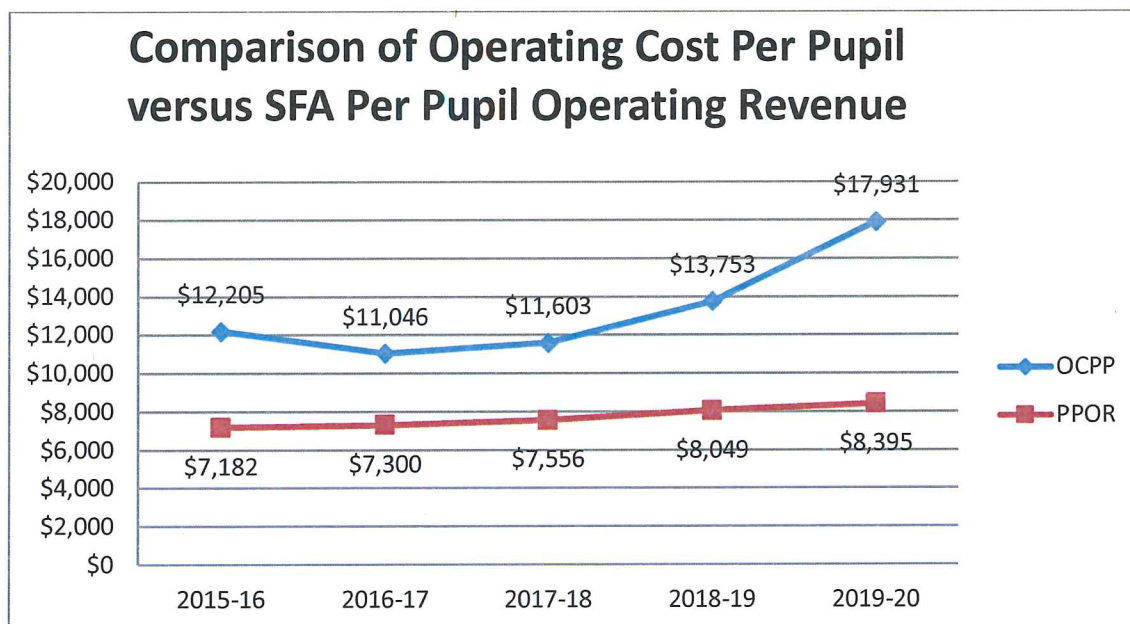
The administration understands and acknowledges this recommendation does not answer every question or consideration the Board of Education may have on this topic. This written recommendation is intended to provide background on the fiscal and educational concerns facing the district and to offer the rationale for recommending closure of the school.

The administration and staff offer to provide any additional information needed by the BOE, especially for the board's next meeting on March 9th.

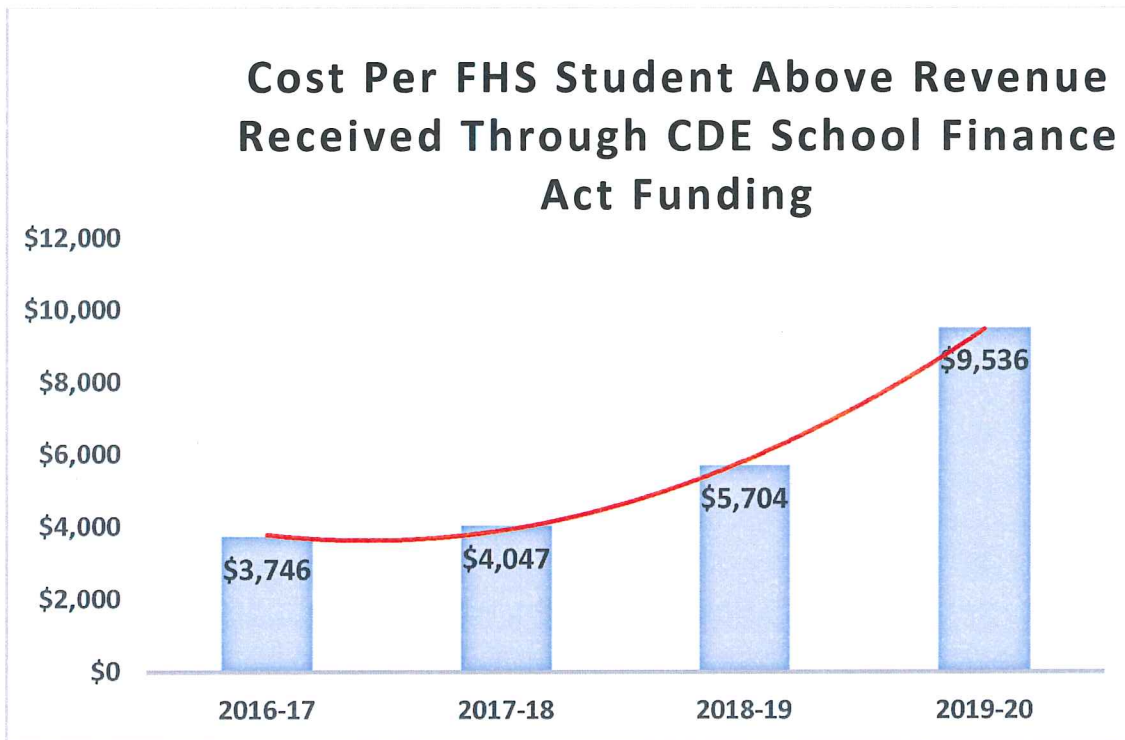
In order for families, staff and others affected by this decision to have resolution about the future of the school, we request the board conclude consideration of this recommendation by its April 6th Regular Meeting.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ADDED AFTER THE FEBRUARY 24, 2020 BOE MEETING

The financial sustainability of Frontier High School has been a concern for a number of years, with the 2019-20 school year being the most pronounced. Historically, the school district has invested more in the education of students at Frontier High School than students at other district schools, on a per student basis. The district also spent significantly more per student than the amount received from at least 2015 through 2020, as the following charts illustrate.



Sources: CDE School Finance Unit
District Financial Reports

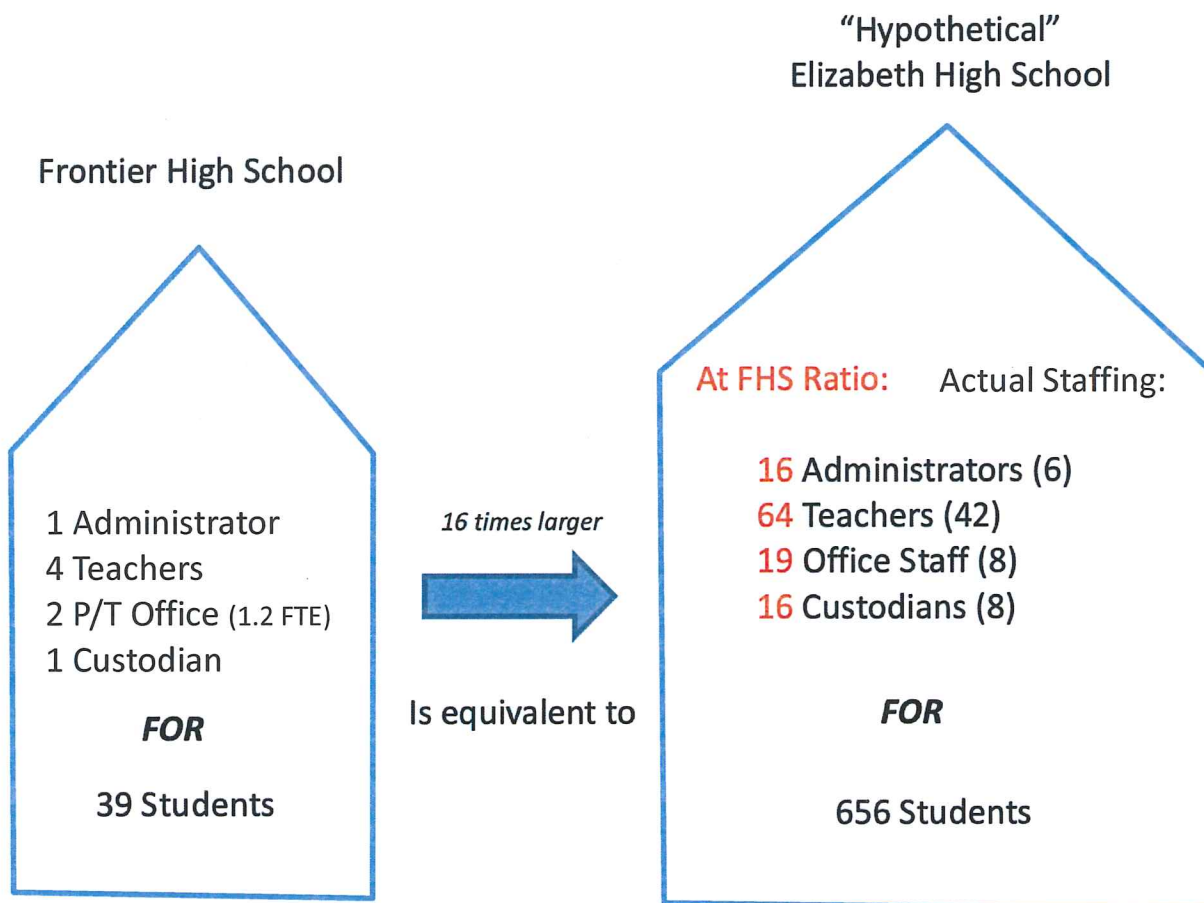


Sources: CDE School Finance Unit
District Financial Reports

The primary reason Frontier costs significantly exceed revenue is an unsustainable staff-to-student ratio, regardless of facilities costs. If facilities costs are removed from the calculation, the cost per Frontier student remains well ABOVE the revenue received through CDE School Finance Act Funding (SFA), at \$4,926 per student above SFA revenue. This is 58% more than SFA funding, excluding facilities costs. This per student cost for an entire school, even when excluding facilities costs, remains problematic. Moving Frontier to another location, however inexpensive that location might be, would not transform Frontier into a financially sustainable educational program.

To illustrate this dynamic, if the Frontier staff-to-student ratio were used to determine the number of employees at other district schools, those schools would have many more employees. This hypothetical increase in staffing would certainly enhance the educational opportunities for students, but would be financially unfeasible.

The following is one example of using the Frontier ratio to staff Elizabeth High School. This example is only meant to provide further illustration of the fact that the Frontier staff-to-student ratio is not financially feasible.



SUMMARY

To conclude, there are two financial considerations for the Board of Education to consider. One is the financial feasibility of the Frontier alternative high school program, regardless of location. Another is the financial burden, and opportunity, related to the school building/property located at Banner Street. While these two issues are connected since the Frontier program is located with the Banner Street building, the issues are independent of each other and can be considered separately and in different time frames. We recommend prioritizing a decision regarding the Frontier program, followed by a decision about the building/property. Regardless of the actual decision regarding the program, a decision before April 6th would be even more helpful, if possible, since students, parents, and staff would have more time to plan for the future.

Thank you again for your consideration.

Attachments:

2009 Board of Education Resolution Regarding Frontier High School

2018 Facilities Master Plan

2013 Infrastructure Assessment Committee Report

Policy IKF (2021) Graduation Requirements (Graduating class of 2021 and beyond)