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**Board of Education votes to close Ames Elementary and Whitman Elementary schools;
Low enrollments make schools difficult for district to sustain**

Tonight, the Littleton Public Schools Board of Education took action on a recommendation to close Ames and Whitman elementary schools at the end of the current school year.

The Board voted four in favor and one abstention to pass the motion. This concludes a year's worth of deliberation about how to best address the issue of underutilized facilities in LPS. The community, parent, and staff-based Facility Use Task Force, which was charged by the Board a year ago to study the issue, gave its final report and recommendations to the Board on October 23. The Board then held a workshop on October 27 and had a special meeting November 6 to further discuss possible options.

"Making the decision to close these two schools was the most difficult decision we've ever made as a Board, and is probably the most difficult decision any Board ever has to make," said Board President Bob Colwell. "This issue has been facing the district for years, and the time has come when something had to be done or the whole district would suffer."

Franklin and Peabody elementary schools will welcome Ames students next fall. Moody, Runyon, and Highland elementary schools will welcome Whitman students. This plan will put all five of these receiving elementary buildings well over the capacity minimums set by the Facility Use Task Force.

Board members stated that the decision to close Ames and Whitman was based largely on the fact that both schools have a history of declining enrollment and have been the smallest schools in LPS for some time. Data shows that this pattern of enrollment decline is projected to continue despite achievement gains, which will make it very difficult for the district to continue financially supporting these schools in the future.

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The Board also stressed that it is not interested in “shuttering” schools. Instead, the Board will be considering different ways to use the Ames and Whitman facilities to enhance education in LPS and in the community as a whole. Ideas the Board has heard include early childhood centers, partnerships with other education institutions, and alternative education centers. In the meantime, both facilities will be maintained and activity will continue in both buildings.

Declining enrollment and excess capacity have been issues that LPS has studied numerous times since the 1980s. LPS has experienced fairly steady enrollment declines from within its boundaries over time because there are fewer school-age children in the communities it serves than in the past when many LPS schools were built. LPS serves a population that stays in their homes years after their children have graduated and is landlocked, as well.

Ames Elementary has experienced steady enrollment declines for the past 23 years. Whitman has experienced steady enrollment declines for the past 14 years. The district has been successful at marketing its programs over the years; about 2,000 students currently attend LPS schools from out-of-district. But, the decline in the number of in-district, school-age children outpaces gains that can be made through out-of-district enrollment.

LPS is not alone in this issue. There are 178 school districts in Colorado, and more than 100 of them are experiencing declining enrollment.

There is no question that the Ames and Whitman communities contribute a great deal to the overall academic success of Littleton Public Schools. As a district, LPS consistently ranks first, second, or third on the Colorado Student Assessment Program tests (CSAP) at all grade levels and in all areas tested when compared with other Denver Metro area school districts. Three-quarters of all LPS schools are rated “high” or “excellent” by the Colorado Department of Education. No LPS schools are rated “low” or “unsatisfactory.”

These schools have outstanding teachers, students, and parents who are deeply committed to educational excellence. This will not change; the students will continue to excel in their new schools, and the Ames and Whitman staff, students, and parents will enhance already excellent schools across the district.

Plans are currently in place to help ease the transition for students, parents, and staff. Parents will play a large role in shaping what those transition activities include.

“What is best for our students has always been our primary consideration. The LPS community pulls together in challenging times, and I have every confidence that this will again be the case,” said Superintendent Scott Murphy. “We will work together to ensure a successful transition and a bright future for all students.”

Background

In November, 2007, the Board asked that a committee be formed to again study the issue of underutilized facilities. The Facility Use Task Force began meeting in February, 2008. The Task Force presented its work thus far to the Board in August, 2008. The Board was pleased with the values and criteria developed by the Task Force to guide its work around equity in programming, choice for parents, and high-quality staff. The Task Force also met its charge of identifying minimum and maximum school sizes and percent of capacity for the Board’s consideration as it continued its conversations. The Task Force held three community forums that combined drew an attendance of around 1,000. After taking into consideration the feedback it had received, the Task Force narrowed its recommendations and gave its final report to the Board October 23.