

Why School Closure Is the Worst Option

As members of the Save Our Del Mar Schools Committee (SOS) and parents of children attending Del Mar Hills Academy of Arts & Sciences (known as “the Hills”), we are deeply concerned about Marsha Sutton’s November 19 column “The Hills would make a perfect district office.” We feel her piece was completely inappropriate—not only in tone, but in its failure to offer any sober, community-building response to a complex issue facing the families that attend the Hills and Del Mar Heights (“the Heights”) schools, as well as the entire Del Mar Unified School District (DMUSD).

As parents from SOS have publicly stated at both the 7/11 District Advisory Committee meetings and the DMUSD Board of Trustees’ meetings, the budget issues facing DMUSD are a district-wide concern that require a district-wide solution. We’d like to address some of those concerns:

Closing a School Will Not Resolve the Budget Crisis

While the exact dollar value of any cost savings resulting from a school closing has been modified and reduced over the course of the 7/11 Committee’s process, the number stated in Proposal B is \$394,000, which reflects a savings in the cost of salaries for a principal and administration staff. This dollar amount contributes little to the salvation of programs across DMUSD schools. Furthermore, there has been no assurance given by the Board or DMUSD administrators that the savings will be used to guarantee the future of any school’s enhanced studies curriculum (ESC) program. Parent contributions—and not the closing of any school—ensure the continuation of our district’s ESC programs. Meanwhile, as our community has been fighting each other over school closure, the Board has quietly increased the district’s ongoing expenses by over \$1 million. In light of this, it is difficult to predict what would happen to any savings from school closure.

Uprooting 400 Children to Satisfy the Needs of 20 Adults

As Sutton mentioned, the “driving force” behind the establishment of the 7/11 Committee was the need to find a location for the DMUSD administrative offices, and she suggests that the Hills would make an ideal new home for these offices. We feel that considering school closure as the solution for a new office site is irresponsible. We are not talking about an under-performing school: The Hills is a nationally recognized, Blue Ribbon school that has served as an incubator for ideas

that have been adopted and disseminated throughout DMUSD. School closure should be decided upon by its own merits and drawbacks, not as a solution to house 20 adults in DMUSD administrative offices.

In addition, the proposals that recommend school closure to solve any district facility need are the ones that uproot and impact the greatest number of children. The three proposals (B, H and I) recommending closure of either the Hills or Ashley Falls will impact approximately 400 district school children. These three proposals put the needs of 20 adults before the needs and emotional well-being of our district's students. Other viable options exist.

One example is the proposal to build a modular structure on district-owned land at Torrey Hills (Proposal G). This proposal is cost-effective. The projected cost to build a modular building is \$100/square foot versus \$250/square foot to remodel existing school rooms. This proposal also meets the office-relocation timeline and is one of two proposals that does not impact the children. Proposal G also speaks to Sutton's suggested benefit of housing the DMUSD administrators in close proximity to the children they serve as a reminder of "why (they) are there."

The first sentence in the State of California's *Closing a School Best Practices Guide* sums it up well: "The decision to close a school is anguishing. It profoundly affects parents, neighborhoods, communities, district personnel, and, of course, students. It affects relationships, routines, and cherished territorialities. In short, it alters not only district operations but also lives." The Board should direct the 7/11 Committee to remove all school closure options from consideration.

All Parents and Community Members Need to be Concerned

The green-colored flyer the SOS distributed in recent weeks was created to raise awareness and to instill a sense of urgency in a community that we feel is not yet fully aware of the circumstances surrounding a possible school closure. The flyer's content was based on data published by the 7/11 Committee publicly available via its side bar link on the district website (www.DMUSD.org). None of the information was fabricated. The SOS committee is made up of volunteer parents with families, jobs and busy lives—you can be assured that none of our efforts are exerted with the intent of being trivial or providing untrue statements.

At the time of the flyer's publication, the 7/11 Committee was to present its recommendations to the Board within a three-week time frame (a presentation that has now been postponed to the Board's January 27 meeting, or possibly at an

earlier special session). If Sutton's column had any value, it was to ignite awareness about this imminent decision—so THANK YOU!

We Want All Schools to Remain Open

What parents in all of DMUSD wouldn't feel the same if it were their school facing closure and their child being asked to live with what we feel certain will be sad and detrimental consequences? Everyone needs to understand that by closing the Hills, it is not just the Hills' students who will face the impacts and inconveniences of being relocated to an overcrowded school. It will equally and negatively affect the students residing in the city of Del Mar, the Heights' neighborhood, and the Carmel Del Mar neighborhood.

It has been suggested at Board meetings that a consolidation of the Hills/Heights should result in a "new" school, with a new name, new principal and blending of school cultures and programs. However, neither the Hills nor the Heights were ever designed to accommodate 600+ children and such a consolidation process is not within the charter of the 7/11 Committee.

Enrollment/Capacity Numbers

While Sutton was critical of the enrollment numbers used in creating the SOS information flyer, she also appears to have unknowingly run into the same issue that has dogged the 7/11 Committee – obtaining accurate information from DMUSD. Sutton chose to contact two principals and we chose to use the numbers published in 7/11 Committee Proposal B. There was nothing nefarious in our decision to use these proposal numbers, as it is Proposal B that discusses completely closing the Hills. In fact, since it is the 7/11 Committee's task to provide recommendations on available space in DMUSD facilities, we feel the use of those numbers is most appropriate, especially since district staff once again verified these figures last week.

Proposal B currently states that the actual 2009 enrollment of DMUSD students who live west of I-5 is 600. Alternately, if we use the numbers from 7/11's November 24 posting *Proposal Enrollment Analysis*, the number of total students that would be enrolled at the Heights should a consolidation occur would be 610, or 103% of current capacity. As we stated before, this population will not fit into the Heights as it currently exists and some rooms currently used for enrichment programs will need to be used as classrooms. These numbers include sending all transfer students to their home schools and moving the El Camino Real area,

known as Area 16 g,j,k, from the Hills/Heights boundary to Carmel Del Mar, and relocating the Heights' Special Day sections to Ashley Falls. (Please see the 7/11 Committee website and a similar spreadsheet comparing post-school-closure enrollment at www.saveourdelmarschools.org.)

Proposal B includes housing the expanded population in 13 portable (“relocatable”) buildings currently located at the Heights – the largest number of portables at any of the district’s schools. These portables were added to house students during a period when students were temporarily housed at the Heights while various east of I-5 schools were being built. Even after these students were transferred to their new neighborhood school, these portables remained at the Heights and have inflated the capacity of the site (i.e. “modified school capacity”).

The disadvantages associated with those portables are glaringly absent from the proposals. At the Heights, the 13 portables are located on valuable black-top space that is no longer accessible to the students for recess, P.E. or lunch. The campuses east of I-5 with 600+ students have the brick-and-mortar classrooms as well as black-top and playing field space to support that many students. Currently, the Heights does not even have lunch tables for its 454 existing students as they would consume additional, valuable black top space. Imagine the lunch and recess scene after 184 relocated students are added to the existing enrollment.

Impact on Property Values in the Neighborhood

We understand that Sutton believes there will be no impact on residential real estate values near the Hills should it close, but those of us who moved to this neighborhood disagree. If you have kids (or even if you don’t), ask yourself: What priority did you place on the value of the local school in your decision to buy in that neighborhood? To disregard effects on real estate value is yet another example of the short-sighted nature of proposals to close a school.

Traffic and Safety Issues

If the Hills were closed and its student population consolidated at the Heights, then the impact from the increased traffic flowing in and out of the Heights will be significant, to say the least. Again, due to the established infrastructure and design of the Heights neighborhood, there are no known remedies. For example, in the event of an emergency such as a fire in the adjoining canyon, there is only one route for vehicles into and out of the Heights campus.

But more importantly, we're confident that we're not alone in placing a high value on our children being able to safely walk or bike to school. In his report to the Board earlier this year, the beloved Gary Wilson, former Ocean Air principal, spoke to the importance of providing a safe path to the school for those children who chose to walk or ride their bikes from the neighborhoods near that school. The concern is no different west of I-5. Consolidating the Hills and the Heights does not promote the healthy choice of walking to school. The two opportunities to safely cross Del Mar Heights Road at Mango Drive and Crest Way are not at all aligned with the most direct pathways to the school. And everyone knows that, with 5 minutes until the bell rings, children will always choose the fastest path to school which is the most dangerous – dashing across Del Mar Heights Road. Of course, there will be families who drive to school anyway, which will only increase traffic in the Heights neighborhood.

Our Final Challenge to the Board

We challenge the Board to immediately withdraw the school closure option if it is not their explicit intent to close a school. Closing a school causes a lasting scar on a community that will be felt for years to come. In this case, the savings purported from closing a school are minimal in comparison to the damage it will cause the DMUSD community.

When school closure is removed from the immediate discussion, only then can the community come together and solve DMUSD's financial and real estate problems in a fair manner that achieves long-term success. The threat of school closure only exacerbates the division within the DMUSD community, which, in turn, affects families, children, teachers, staff and especially ESC fundraising. Imagine what we could have accomplished in the last six months if we had instead spent our energies working towards a common goal. We believe the community should unite—and put all DMUSD children first.

Amy Caterina, Beth and Reid Westburg, Liz Shopes, Marybeth Norgren, Per Cederstav and Katrina Hunt, on behalf of SOS