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Experts will help Hillsborough schools redraw their boundaries

Racial equity and efficient use of resources are two of the many issues they hope to explore.



Wharton High School, 20150 Bruce B. Downs Blvd. in New Tampa, opened in 1997. Its attendance boundaries mean a long commute for students in North Tampa. [DENNIS JOYCE | Times]

By **Marlene Sokol**

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As tight as money is in the Hillsborough County School District, officials are about to spend as much as \$475,000 to try and make sense of school attendance boundaries.

The money will come from capital funds, meaning the general fund reserve — which is now under state scrutiny — will not be affected.

But board members and staff agreed in a workshop Tuesday that the step is necessary so they can figure out how to keep some schools from being half empty while others are bursting at the seams.

As things now stand, the district has schools in the urban core and inner-ring suburbs with hundreds of empty seats, while some of its schools in South Tampa and fast-growing southeast Hillsborough are well over capacity.

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The district's five-year capital improvement plan, which is based on enrollment in late 2020, listed more than 40 schools that were at least a third empty. A handful — including Just Elementary and Monroe Middle — were more than half empty.

District leaders have said those figures could be unusually low because of the coronavirus pandemic, saying they preferred to use data from prior years.

Still, they identified a large territory stretching from the University of South Florida to Gibsonton that they are calling the “repurposing area.” In this zone, which straddles an industrial corridor along Interstate 75, an unknown number of schools might ultimately serve different age groups or, in some cases, become office space.

Meanwhile, new schools are badly needed for a booming population in southernmost Hillsborough County. Studies by Tindale Oliver, a consultant already working for the district, show that of 18 new schools that are needed by 2035, 15 will be in the southern county. Conflict with the county over road construction has stood in the way of getting some of those new schools built.

Board members and administrators were careful not to discuss closing any school outright. One reason: Under state law, a school that is deemed surplus must be made available to charter schools, which use tax money but operate outside the district system.

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“Repurposing is absolutely what we will do in this organization,” said Superintendent Addison Davis, who received harsh criticism months ago when he suggested some under-enrolled schools might close.

District leaders are discussing everything from expanded preschool to adult education in these spaces, although it is not yet clear how they would pay for these programs. Other possibilities include a military-themed school near MacDill Air Force Base or schools that use Montessori methods.

They agreed Tuesday that the advantages of hiring a consultant make it well worth the cost.

“Even one of the recommendations could save the district millions of dollars,” said growth management director Amber Dickerson.

And using experts can help the district defend itself against possible lawsuits, including from school communities not wanting to have to change buildings, district officials said.

Some board members have been asking for a boundary study for years and said they were glad to see action finally taken.

for parents to get involved or even pick up a sick child.

New Tampa's Wharton High School, for example, still serves neighborhoods near Temple Terrace that were included in its original 1997 boundaries. This is the case even though Freedom High, which opened in 2002 south of Wharton, carved out those neighborhoods immediately surrounding it.

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In East Tampa, middle school students are bused as far away as Brandon's McLane Middle School, as the schools that originally served that part of the city are now magnets.

Board member Henry "Shake" Washington said he was concerned about how changes would affect his urban electoral district. "Transportation is our biggest challenge," he said.

Staff assured the board that recommendations will be made public at least a year before any changes take effect, and there will be extensive community outreach along the way.

Separately, district officials said Chief of Innovation Kim Bays is working on an extensive evaluation of the district's dozens of magnet schools.

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