Board closes 2 schools, initiates layoffs

By JOHN SEMIEN
Advocate staff writer

The School Board voted Thursday to close two schools and to mail notices informing about 200 employees of possible layoffs in efforts to offset a money crunch anticipated for the 1986-87 school year.

The notices to employees initiate the board's reduction-in-force policy, giving workers in 14 job categories 30 days' notice that there may be layoffs in their employment classifications.

The four-hour session was marked by pleading parents opposed to the school closures and angry outbursts from board members criticizing Superintendent of Schools Raymond Arveson for not providing timely information on the measures, which were proposals from the board staff.

At one point, board member Frank Millican accused Arveson of withholding information from some members of the board.

"This superintendent and staff have started operating this board by meetings with board members in his office," Millican said. "I have not gotten information that other board members have. . . . I resent that type of operation of this school system."

Under Arveson's recommendations, Northdale Elementary and Valley Park Middle schools will be closed beginning with the 1986-87 school year this fall, which Arveson said will save the system about $500,000.

About 163 students attending kindergarten through fifth grade at Northdale, the smallest school in the system, will be moved to Belfair Elementary, along with Northdale's extended day program.

The 372 students at Valley Park Middle School will be sent to Westdale, Kenilworth and Glasgow middle schools, according to the changes.

Arveson said Thursday that faculty members, cafeteria and maintenance personnel at the two schools will be reassigned and that the proposal will have to be approved by U.S. District Judge John V. Parker as part of the court-ordered school desegregation plan.

Arveson recommended that Northdale be declared surplus and offered for sale. He said Valley Park can be used as a new home for the system's Pupil Appraisal Center.

"Both of these proposals are not only educationally sound, but educational enhancements," Arveson said. "We feel Valley Park, as a middle school, has too few students . . . ."

Board member Eva Legard blasted Arveson for not informing her of the decision to close Northdale until last week, which she called a "slap in the face" to the parents who support the school.

"Parents should have been made aware," she said.

"As a board member, should have been made aware." Legard said closing Northdale, which Legard represents, "treats promises school officials made to parents in drawing new students to the school.

"Parents don't forget these things, but we do," Legard said. "To sell Northdale to parents we talked about accessibility, that it was the best thing in the world for their children . . . ."

Board President Press Robinson agreed that more notice to parents would have been better.

"This is a very important move, and the community should have a say about it," Robinson said.

"What we are doing is removing another bump from the road."
Carolyn Rushing talks to board about Northdale closing

School

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black community."

Board member Nelson Clothier said opposition to the proposal made him feel like a “whipped dog;” but that the measures were necessary because of cuts in state funding to public schools.

A lengthy discussion ensued in which board member L.L. Hines called staff-prepared handouts on the proposal misleading and said it “would not get an A.”

In public discussion on the closures, parents complained about disruption of students at the schools and not having enough time to consider the proposals.

John Turnipseed, PTA president at Valley Park, said the school is the newest in the parish at only 19 years in operation and that parents had worked hard to change the school’s image as a “pseudo-black school.”

“Both black and white parents are finally recognizing its value,” he said. “Keeping Valley Park open would be an asset to the School Board. I’m a bit upset because I’m just finding out about this.”

Parent Beverly Trahan said she also was concerned about the short notice to parents about the closures.

“Our children are being displaced, there’s no other way to look at it,” she said. “We need to be in a position to adequately explain to them why their school is being closed.”

Carolyn Rushing, PTA president at Northdale, said parents at the school were concerned about there being room for all of the students to be transferred and about equipment purchased by the organization.

Marie Ellerman, a parent from Northdale, said she sends her children to Northdale because of its small size.

“They feel better attention there than at any other school in the parish,” she said. “You all are closing a really good school.”

The measure was approved 7-4, with board members Jim Talbot, T.H. Montgomery, Mike McClary, Robert Crawford, Donna Deshotels, Robert Meador and Nelson Clothier voting in favor.

Legard, Millican, Robinson and board member L.L. Hines voted against the closures.

Board member Sue Fowler did not attend the meeting.

Arveson said Thursday’s vote on personnel will activate the first phase of the board’s reduction in force policy, which will dispatch letters to employees in 14 categories being considered for possible layoffs.

The categories include: driver’s education, health and physical education teachers with up to three years experience, air conditioning and refrigeration workers, business education teachers with up to three years experience and English teachers with up to two years experience.

He said clerical workers in the computer operator I and personnel clerk I category with up to one year on the job could be affected, as well as people classified as steno clerk II with up to two years experience, school clerk II with up to three years experience, school clerk I with up to five years experience and teacher aides with up to seven years experience.

Letters also will be sent to school nurses with up to six years experience and people in the utility laborer III category with up to one year on the job, he said.

Under the board’s reduction in force policy, the letters allow a 30-day period before the board notifies individual employees that they will lose their jobs.

Arveson said he would talk about the proposal with William Bradford Reynolds, assistant U.S. attorney general for civil rights.

Reynolds said he would make a televised report on the matter, then changed it to requiring Arveson to make a televised report on his proposals for staff reductions.

“I feel there’s some view in the public that we are over-staffed with people not directly involved in the classrooms,” Hines said. “I believe we need to look at that before we punch the button to kick off this 30-day period.”

But board member Donna Deshotels said sending the letters was in the best interest of school employees.

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