Board under pressure

Abbeville High students to move to empty building in January

Bernard Chaillot
bachaillot@theadvertiser.com

ABBEVILLE — The Vermilion Parish School Board would rather switch than fight.

Under mounting pressure from parents, teachers, bus drivers and students stressed over Abbeville High School sharing a middle school campus, the school board has opted to lease an old T-shirt factory starting in January.

The high school was severely damaged during Hurricane Lili, forcing the district to come up with an alternative way of educating students.

Instead of attending I.H. Williams Middle School on an alternate schedule, high school students will move into the Charles Gay Building, formerly the Fruit of the Loom.

The Gay Building’s lease price of $240,000 breaks down to $60,000 a week for the eight weeks officials estimate the building will be used as an impromptu school. Abbeville High is slated to reopen by March 1.

"That’s if everything goes as planned," Superintendent Dan Dartez said Monday after he and other officials toured the Gay Building. "If there are unforeseen delays in reopening, we’ll be glad we did this, and so will a lot of other people. The lease period price lets us stay for up to six months.”

Dartez also said the lease includes having the building retro-fitted for school use with partitions to create 40 classrooms.

The Charles Gay Building is going to be the site for Abbeville High School classes beginning in January. With the School Board under pressure from parents and teachers, students will no longer have to share the middle school with its students.

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Pressure

The building should be ready for occupancy by Dec. 15. Board financial officer Phil Sellers said the Federal Emergency Management Agency is slated to pick up 75 percent of the lease cost, with the state paying 10 percent, leaving the school board’s share at only $38,000 over eight weeks.

Officially, said that is a relatively small price to pay to put an end to the daily onslaught of telephone calls from the people who are unhappy with the shared campus solution imposed by the board.

Other people have questioned whether having more than 800 students in one large open building will create headache-like noise problems. Again, officials said that would be preferable to the din coming from parents and teachers.

Justine Hebert, who has nieces and nephews at both schools, said, “Some school children are catching the bus at 6 a.m. and returning home at 6:45 p.m., so children as young as 11 years old are commuting to and attending school 13 hours a day.”

Principal Randy Schexnayder said the hectic situation at the middle school has resulted in absentee and academic problems. "Too many kids are getting burnt out, not doing homework, not coming to school on Saturdays," he said. "The sooner we get back to a normal schedule, the better.”

Schexnayder also said the “acoustical foam” partitions used to create the cubic-style classrooms should help hold down noise levels.

Superintendent-elect Joey Hebert, who succeeds Dartez in January, said the estimate for moving high school students back into the school coincides with high-stakes LEAP and Iowa testing, crucial parts of the state education accountability process.

Senior Keyanna Landry said school is school, regardless of location, “but it sure has been a crazy year.”

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THE DAILY ADVERTISER
LAFAYETTE, LA