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LOCAL

Akron Public Schools board passes redistricting plan, rezoning thousands of students

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The Akron Public Schools board approved a long-awaited redistricting plan in a special meeting Wednesday night, voting to close one building ahead of next school year and repurpose another.

The vote will rezone thousands of students into new schools, solving an overcrowding issue in elementary buildings in the North cluster and adjusting boundary lines to move with shifting enrollment.

Robinson Community Learning Center will close as an elementary school and become home to the STEM High School next year. Firestone Park Elementary, one of the oldest buildings in the district that was not replaced with a CLC, will also close.

The board voted to keep Essex Early Learning Center open after voting last fall to close it, along with Stewart ELC, to accommodate an expanded pre-K program. Stewart will still close.

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Firestone Park students will be rezoned to Glover, McEbright and Voris CLCs. Robinson students will be rezoned to David Hill and Mason community learning centers, keeping them within the East cluster of schools.

Essex will remain open, but Harris Jackson students who have been at Essex due to overcrowding at their home school will be returned to Harris Jackson.

Some Harris Jackson students will be rezoned to Barber CLC. Forest Hill CLC will also have some students rezoned to Harris Jackson, and a small number will be moved from Barber to Seiberling CLC.

To pass the vote, the board first voted Wednesday 5-1 to rewrite its policy on redistricting, removing requirements for public notice and public comment.

Only board member Rene Molenaar dissented, but several board members expressed frustration that the vote was necessary, and that the district's lawyer was not on hand to explain and defend the changes to them and the public.

"Every time we ask a question, we don't have an answer," Molenaar said.

The revisions to the policy included eliminating the requirement that the board "shall provide notice" to "the public" regarding proposed changes to boundary lines for schools, which determine students' building assignments each school year. That was changed to require the district to notify only parents of current students in the buildings that would be affected, not the general public or possible future parents and students of that school.

The revisions also removed a key time element in the notification process, which requires the public to have a 30-day notice ahead of the board's first, second and third readings of a resolution that would change a school's boundary lines.

There was concern, Board Vice President Carla Jackson explained, that the district had only done meetings at individual buildings and within clusters that were impacted by the changes and had not communicated the plan sufficiently to the rest of the district and public. The advice of counsel, she said, was to revise the policy in an "emergency" vote, which is permitted by the bylaws for circumstances of a threat to students' or employees' safety or welfare.

The "emergency," Jackson said, was that the board needed to give parents, teachers and administrators immediate clarity on where they attend school or teach next year.

Molenaar, who chairs the board's legal contracts and board policy committee, argued the issue was not an emergency that called for rewriting policy on a whim.

"This is an inconvenience of our own doing," she said. "Mismanagement of our own doing does not mean an emergency."

Superintendent Michael Robinson denied that the administration had done anything wrong in overlooking the specific language in the policy and what it called for. He noted several times that it was written before his arrival, although the redistricting process started after he became superintendent last year.

"There has been nothing wrong that has been done," he said. "It's just a policy from a couple years ago needs to be revisited."

Board member Barbara Sykes, the policy committee's co-chair, agreed there should have been another option beyond rewriting the policy at the last minute, but she said she would commit to revising the policy again in committee.

"What else can we do but vote for this?" she said.

After the 5-1 vote on the policy change, the vote to approve the redistricting plan was 6-0. Board member Bruce Alexander was absent.

This story will be updated.

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