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NEWS

Residents concerned about closure of 'landmark' Firestone Park Elementary in Akron



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Residents voiced serious concerns about what would happen to historic Firestone Park Elementary if the Akron Public Schools proceeds with plans to close the building next school year.

"It's a landmark – I've lived here since I was a kid; I grew up right here; I went to this school; my son goes to this school now," said Chris Leighman, who questioned whether any money the district might save with the closure would be better used keeping the building open. "It's a good school and a good area and it's right in the center of the park. There are a ton of kids in our school."

About 100 people were in the auditorium Monday night at the school, nestled between the Firestone Park Community Center and the adjacent park, and the Firestone Park Branch of the Akron-Summit County Public Library.

Michael Stoneman said he also went to Firestone Park Elementary and still lives in the area.

"I went to school here throughout the '90s and I have memories from the school, like when I was in fifth grade – that's when like September 11th happened," he said. "All of my friends that I still have today came from this school, and I don't want to see this school bulldozed. I mean, it's a staple of this community. Like, 30 years later, I'm still here."

The closure is part of a redistricting plan the school system hopes to implement, pending the board of education's review and approval, expected in January, said Akron Superintendent Michael Robinson.

A presentation on the plan is available online at <https://www.akronschools.com/district/district-information/redistricting>.

A final community meeting is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Thursday at East CLC.

APS plan: Akron school administrators to close 3 buildings, plan shift in attendance boundaries

Robinson previously said the restructuring of the district would ensure more students are learning in new APS community learning centers as the district closes Firestone Park, along with Essex Early Learning Center and Stewart Early Learning Center. The closures were approved last summer.

The closing of Firestone Park next school year will see its students go to McEbright, Voris or Glover community learning centers in the Garfield cluster of schools.

Residents offer concerns

Many who attended Monday's informational meeting questioned the need to close the school, and what might come after the closing.

Aaron Uhl said he was a member of Progress through Preservation of Greater Akron, a group that has worked to preserve and restore historic buildings since the 1980s.

"For the schools itself, I can understand what the population changes in Akron mean, that this is important for the future of the students," he said. "However, I think it also does a disservice for the students that may not have the ability to be bused in in the way that they're proposing.

"I think that there still needs to be some understanding about how this will be implemented and some of the students that may fall within the cracks."

He said the district should also let the community know what its plans are for the building.

"There are many different cases where schools like this are are used for different purposes," he added. "There's even schools in Akron that have been used as apartments and schools are great foundations to build on for public use."

Elizabeth Parker, who said she has several children in the district, noted they all attend different schools. She said the redistricting would further complicate her life.

"So I go to four different schools every morning and every afternoon to pick up my children," she said. "I can't get employment. Who wants to hire a mom who can only work from about 8 or 9 a.m. until about 1:30 p.m.? That's affecting my bottom line and my husband works second shift – so it makes it hard to to do anything, are you talking about the sustainability?"

After the meeting, several residents said they were concerned their property values would drop and crime in the neighborhood would increase if the school building is not put to good use.

Others said they were surprised to learn that the closure had already been approved by the board of education, saying they had not been given a chance to weigh-in on the decision.

While district officials say the school closure has already been decided, the board of education will be asked to approve the redistricting in January so it can take effect next school year.

Families affected by boundary shifts would have to request changes to their children's assignments during a special open enrollment period between Jan. 29 and Feb. 9, according to the proposal.

While elementary school students may find they are assigned to new buildings, continuity will automatically be granted for current students in their respective high schools, officials said.

Other shifts part of proposed changes

If the plan is approved, David Hill CLC, now in the East cluster, will rejoin the Garfield cluster where it was originally. It will be an open enrollment option for Firestone Park students to attend. David Hill's graduating fifth-grade classes would attend Innes CLC instead of East.

Other changes involve the North cluster of schools, where an influx of immigrant families has resulted in overcrowding, while other areas of the district have seen decreasing enrollment.

Harris-Jackson opened as a new community learning center in the North Hill neighborhood in 2017, but is now at nearly 130% capacity with 623 students enrolled, school officials said.

Under the plan, students in the Chapel Hill area east of Home Avenue who are now part of the North cluster would be reassigned to the East cluster, meaning some students from

Harris-Jackson CLC in North Hill will be going to Barber CLC.

Essex, which has been used to accommodate students from the overflowing Harris-Jackson, will see its students return to Harris-Jackson.

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