

Hillside Future Action Item
For Feb. 21, 2007 Board Agenda – Future Action Item

Approve the Superintendent's Recommendations Regarding the Follow-Up Review of Hillside Alternative School

In February 2006, the Board reviewed Hillside Alternative School as part of a larger district review of elementary alternative schools. As a result of that initial review, the Board voted on February 15, 2006 to eliminate grade caps for Hillside and three other alternative schools reviewed in 2005-06 and took the following actions specific to Hillside:

1. Directed district staff to work with Hillside to develop a plan for program modification to address the key findings of the report related to the lack of distinctiveness of its strategy and to determine if and to what extent program modifications are feasible and practical in light of the continuing enrollment decline's impact on their ability to continue with a strong and viable program.
2. Directed staff to begin the process of planning for a relocation of Hillside, but only if it is determined that the program modification plan will result in increased viability and a clearly distinctive strategy for the school. Relocation of Hillside to a co-location with another alternative school or a middle school should be considered as part of the district's larger review of boundaries, enrollment patterns, and facilities planning.

In 2005-06, the Alternative School Review Team specifically concluded that Hillside, as then configured, did not represent a distinctive strategy for achieving the board's educational goals. They found the individual educational components of Hillside's program to be admirable but not, in and of themselves, distinctive. The Review Team also concluded that if the current enrollment trends continue, Hillside would not be able to remain viable as a separate school. At the time of the initial 2005-06 review, Hillside's enrollment was 111.5 (K=.5) or 121 (K=1.0), which was below the school's enrollment cap of 132 (K=.5) or 145 (K=1).

Because of concerns about the declining enrollments, the Review Team in 2005 encouraged the staffs and parents of Hillside and Adams to begin an internal dialogue about potential remedies. They noted that Hillside was failing to attract a sufficient number of students to meet its enrollment targets and that Adams was losing a significant percentage of the students living within its enrollment boundaries to a variety of other schools (56% to alternative schools, 27% to other neighborhood schools, 16% to charter schools.)

During the Review Team's initial meeting with the Hillside staff and parents in October 2005, a suggestion of merging the schools or creating a program within a school briefly surfaced in the context of a discussion about class size disparities and financial constraints. The Review Team encouraged the schools to further examine those possibilities. They posited that in light of the findings of their report and with the example of Edgewood/Evergreen, it could present a win-win solution. However, in subsequent conversations, the principal has been very clear that there is virtually no receptivity to the prospect of a merger of the two schools due to vastly different philosophies, educational values, and approaches to instruction.

The plan for Hillside's program modification was initiated in Fall 2006 with an expectation that the review be completed by February 1, 2007. Two members of the district's instructional leadership team, Kay Mehas and Yvonne Curtis, met with Hillside staff in November 2006 and again in January 2007 to talk about the follow-up review process and to provide feedback to Hillside staff on their work toward program modification. The Alternative School Review Team then conducted a follow-up review and provided recommendations in a report to the Superintendent on January 29, 2007.

Questions Considered:

In response to the Board's action on the initial Hillside review, there are three questions to answer. First, does Hillside's planned program modification address the key findings of the Alternative School Review Report of December 30, 2006 related to the "lack of distinctiveness of its strategy." Secondly, is it actually a modification of Hillside's existing program or is it a major change in direction? Third, does the planned program modification contribute to keeping the Hillside program strong and viable in terms of enrollment?

Assuming these questions are affirmatively responded to, then the Board's direction to plan for relocation of Hillside would be the next step. It should be noted that the Board's direction in initiating the Shaping 4J's Future strategic planning process has made it clear that all potential options related to both alternative and neighborhood schools are open for consideration as part of the process. That is, any short-term decision regarding viability does not preclude future decisions that consider longer term strategic needs of the district related to financial resources, declining enrollment, school boundaries, school closures and consolidations, reconfigurations, or alternative school relocations.

Policy Background:

Board Policy IGBH Alternative Schools states:

An alternative school is defined as any complete educational program that represents a distinctive strategy within the district for achieving the educational goals defined in the school board's philosophy statement and in the program goals and objectives of the district's required curriculum. The term "complete educational program" is used herein to mean a school that has an organizational structure, a teaching staff, a budget, and a specific curriculum, each of which is separate from other schools. An alternative school may share the facilities, administrative personnel, and the support services of another school, or may be an autonomous unit. An alternative school may differ from other schools in ways that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- 1. The school may emphasize a specific element of the district's approved curriculum;*
- 2. The school may present the district's approved curriculum in a sequence different than from the order of presentation in other schools;*
- 3. The decision-making process for governance of the school may differ from the processes used in other schools;*
- 4. Students may be grouped for instruction in some unique manner;*
- 5. The teachers in the school may emphasize a specific instructional strategy.*

The policy provides that the superintendent will develop the process for alternative school review and determine the criteria to be used. Review criteria are approved by the Board. The policy also provides that no single criterion will be used to determine action as a result of the review process.

The Alternative Schools Review Process, approved by the Board in August 2005, includes the following provisions:

A decision for alternative school or program modification will be made by the Board of Directors by the end of February in order to allow for school choice decisions to be made for the following school year. Potential outcomes of the alternative school review will include, but are not necessarily limited to:

1. *No Change In Status*
2. *Plan For Improvement*
3. *Program Modification*
4. *Merger With Neighborhood School Or Other Alternative School*
5. *Relocation*
6. *Closure*

Initial Review: The process provided that the initial review (2005-06) of an alternative school would not result in a recommendation for merger, relocation or closure. The first-time review of an existing alternative school or program was limited to an initial recommendation of No Change in Status, Plan for Improvement, or Program Modification. In the case of a recommendation for Plan for Improvement or Program Modification, the recommendation would include a proposed timeline for a follow-up review.

Follow-Up Review: The process requires that follow-up review be conducted after a sufficient amount of time has been given for improvement or modification to occur. The follow-up review will occur within one year, unless the review committee and/or superintendent determines and recommends to the Board that a longer period is warranted. The Board will approve extensions of follow-up reviews beyond the one-year period. The follow-up review could subsequently lead to a recommendation for merger, relocation or closure.

Discussion of Hillside Follow-Up Review

The 2006-07 follow-up review of Hillside focused on the “distinctive strategy” criterion, which asks the following questions:

Does the alternative school/program’s educational program represent a “distinctive strategy” for achieving the board’s educational goals as defined in the board’s adopted goals, guiding beliefs and values, and educational philosophy statement?

- a. How does the alternative school’s program compare to the originally approved charter or proposal?
- b. To what extent and how does the alternative school or program emphasize a specific element of the district’s approved curriculum?

- c. To what extent and how does the alternative school/program present the district's approved curriculum in a sequence different from the order of presentation in other schools?
- d. To what extent and how does the alternative school/program group students for instruction in some unique manner?
- e. To what extent and how do the alternative school/program's teachers emphasize a specific instructional strategy?
- f. Does the alternative school/program anticipate any significant changes in its program?

In January 2007, the Alternative School Review Team consisting of Carl Hermanns, Ray Gross and Jerry Henderson, conducted the follow-up review. The Review Team's observations and conclusions were reported to the Board on February 7, 2007. The team concluded that "Hillside has taken meaningful and viable steps towards creating and implementing a distinctive curriculum that enhances the district's educational program."

The Review Team determined that in response to the Board's directive to pursue program modification, Hillside has worked diligently to create and implement an increased and coherent school-wide focus on international studies. They concluded based upon their interviews and observations that the Hillside staff has made substantial progress in implementing an international studies focus. They further determined that being only one year into their expanded focus, this effort is "obviously a work in progress."

After receiving the report, I posed the following clarifying questions to the committee:

1. Does Hillside's educational program now represent a distinctive strategy within the district for achieving the board's educational goals, as defined in the Board's Alternative Schools policy?
2. Are the changes at Hillside truly a program modification? That is, is it an evolution or an extension of their previous educational program, rather than a new focus or a new way of being distinctive?
3. Will the planned program modification contribute to keeping the Hillside program strong and viable in terms of enrollment?

In regards to the first question, the Alternative School Review Team responded that Hillside staff has worked diligently on creating an integrated curriculum with an international studies focus. The Review Team's report observed evidence of this curricular emphasis throughout the school and found that it was being systematically implemented. However, the team also stated that implementation of the international studies curriculum is a "work in progress". School staff acknowledged the need to expand their efforts in order to fully develop a program that is clearly distinctive from that of other schools in the district. The Review Team believes that given additional time Hillside will achieve the goal of being fully "distinctive" as an alternative school consistent with board policy. Their progress this year, as evidenced by their steps towards effectively integrating their global focus throughout the school, indicates a strong desire and capacity for further refining and implementing their international studies curriculum.

While the Review Team finds that Hillside's program modification with the developing focus on international studies, meets the definition of being a distinctive educational

program, I find myself skeptical. Many of our neighborhood schools have taken similar steps to develop and implement a special curricular emphasis. Crest Drive Elementary School, for example, has developed an integrated school-wide science curriculum focused on our local natural waterways. Other neighborhood schools also have developed focused curricular offerings. The difference, according to the Review Team, is that Hillside presented a framework for an integrated and sequential K-5 curriculum with a specific and in-depth international studies focus that is a significantly enhanced exploration of elements that had previously been a part of their curriculum but now are being brought to the fore in a systematic, sequential, and integrated way, across grades K-5.

My second question was whether the changes Hillside has made are truly a program modification or evolution of their previous educational program. The information provided by Hillside during its initial review in 2006 did not mention a prior emphasis on international studies. Hillside reported a continued focus on “the mastery of the basic skills of language, math, and reading” as presented in its original charter. The 2006 Alternative Review Report summarized Hillside’s educational program description as follows:

- Hillside continues to emphasize advanced skill development in the basic academic core subjects.
- The philosophy of Hillside Traditional School is that the child learns best through a structured and positive learning environment. We seek to develop within the student maximum individual potential and positive self-concepts through a specific behavior policy, a rigorous academic program that includes homework requirements, and self-contained classrooms.
- Hillside was founded on, and continues to support a strong triangular relationship between the students, the teachers, and the parents.

In reviewing other district documents, I have not found reference to international studies as a particular emphasis at Hillside until recently. This has led me to question if the development of an international studies curriculum truly is an evolution or expansion of an element that was integral to Hillside’s previous program or to their original alternative school proposal or whether it really constitutes a substantial redirection of the program which should require Board approval as a new or differently-focused alternative school. But as referenced above, the Review Team concluded that Hillside’s global emphasis is a significantly enhanced exploration of elements that had previously been a part of their curriculum and that their program modification continues to reflect the strong school value on parent-student-teacher communication and cooperation — what Hillside refers to as the “triangular relationship.”

My third question is whether the planned program modification will contribute to keeping the Hillside program strong and viable in terms of enrollment. At the time of the initial 2005-06 review, Hillside’s enrollment was 111.5 (K=.5) or 121 (K=1.0). For 2006-07, the enrollment has grown to 115(K=.5) or 131(K=1), higher than 2005-06 but still less than the enrollment cap of 132 (K=.5) or 145 (K=1). Projections for the next few years are for it to remain at around 120 (K=.5), and then increase to the cap in 2009-10.

Options for Board Action:

On February 15, 2006, when the Board approved the recommendations following Hillside’s initial review, I committed that the Board would review the modifications to

Hillside's program and have an opportunity to respond and give staff direction. Based on the Review Team's follow-up report and the discussion herein, I believe the following options are available to the Board:

1. Adopt a finding that Hillside Alternative School has met the requirement to develop a plan for program modification to address the key findings of the report related to the lack of distinctiveness of its strategy and that the program modifications are feasible and have a practical impact on their ability to continue with a strong and viable program, including an evaluation of enrollment.

This action would signal Board support for continuation of Hillside as a "traditional" alternative school with a distinctive strategy focused on international studies as a part of the district program of school choice.

2. Adopt a finding that Hillside's program modification has substantially met the intent of the requirement for program modification to address the key findings of the 2005-06 Alternative School Review Report related to the lack of distinctiveness of its strategy, that given additional time it can fully meet the requirement, and that the program modifications are feasible and can have a practical impact on Hillside's ability to continue with a strong and viable program, including an evaluation of enrollment. Additionally, this action should require district staff to provide support and monitoring as Hillside's plan for program modification proceeds.

This action would signal Board support for Hillside to continue development and implementation of a distinctive strategy focused on international studies as an evolution and expansion of the existing "traditional" alternative school.

(Note: adoption of either option 1 or 2 would then trigger the process of planning for a relocation of Hillside and consideration of its longer term viability as part of the district's Shaping 4J's Future process.)

3. Adopt a finding that Hillside's program modification does not meet the intent of the requirement for program modification to address the key findings of the the 2005-06 Alternative School Review Report related to the lack of distinctiveness of its strategy, and direct staff to develop a transition plan for either re-application as new or different alternative school, merger or closure.

This action would signal that the Board does not find the implementation of an international studies focus to be a program modification, but rather a new focus or significant redirection that would require either:

- a) re-application for Board approval as a new or different alternative school under board policy IGBH, or
- b) discontinuation of Hillside as an alternative school effective July 1, 2008 and either a merger with Adams or closure.

This would allow Hillside to operate for one more school year and provide for a smoother transition for students, parents and staff. It will also ease the impact on Adams Elementary, the co-located neighborhood school, which shares music, physical education, library and learning center staffing and services with Hillside.

The closure of Hillside Alternative School also may have consequences for other elementary schools in south Eugene. Due to declining enrollment, the district may need to close more school buildings. We now have four neighborhood elementary schools in the South and Churchill regions that have 250 students or less (Adams, Crest, Harris, and Parker). Allowing Hillside to continue operating for one more school year will allow time for our strategic planning process, Shaping 4Js Future, to unfold. The strategic planning process will provide direction for how we configure our programs, services and facilities in the future. We expect to have some possible options or scenarios to discuss with the Board and the community next fall.

Superintendent's Recommendation:

The Superintendent recommends that the Board:

1. Adopt finding that Hillside's program modification:
 - a. has substantially met the intent of the requirement for program modification to address the key findings of the alternative school review report related to the lack of distinctiveness of its strategy;
 - b. given additional time can fully meet the requirement; and
 - c. is feasible and can have a practical impact on their ability to continue with a strong and viable program.
2. Direct district staff to provide support and monitoring as the plan for program modification proceeds.