

Dear supporters and correspondents,

This is an update on TUSD's high school reconfiguration process.

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The follow-up report presented to the board in December, and the board's response.

As you know from my October letter, the board on October 3 requested a follow-up report on the option to move University High School to the current site of Catalina High School, while combining CHS and Rincon High Schools at the site that RHS and UHS currently share. Central administration and representatives from all three high schools presented that follow-up report to the board on December 12.

Staff, especially the superintendent and general counsel, did excellent work on the new report, jointly with the three site councils. Staff had compiled much data for the 25-page preliminary report that led into the October 3 vote, and it compiled much more data for the 140-page follow-up report. Among all school restructuring processes I have seen, including the Fagen and Pedicone closure rounds and the aborted Pfeuffer closure round (before I joined the board), nothing approaches the depth and quality of research that the board has received during the current process.

Some persons over-interpreted the board's vote on October 3 as, in effect, a decision to move ahead with the "UHS-to-CHS" option. That was never true: if it were, then the board would not have wasted staff's time by asking for the exhaustive follow-up report. That report confirmed many of the expected advantages of the UHS-to-CHS option, but it also unearthed enough disadvantages to make it unclear (at least to me) whether this was the best way forward. Therefore, I suggested sending the question back to staff for further study, broadening the scope to other options, and on December 12 the board unanimously agreed. I expect recommendations to appear soon.

Some persons have similarly over-interpreted the board's December 12 vote to mean that UHS-to-CHS is now ruled out. That is also untrue. The board explicitly sent the issue back to staff without preconditions. All options for high school reconfiguration are now on the table, including UHS-to-CHS and other options unrelated to UHS.

At the meeting I pledged not to advocate for or against any proposal, until Trujillo reports back to the board, except to say: doing nothing is not an option. There seems to be broad agreement that the combined problems of overcrowding at RHS/UHS and gross excess capacity at four other high schools can no longer be ignored.

Other board members have mostly shown the same restraint.

Specific issues raised by the follow-up report.

In favor of UHS-to-CHS, the follow-up report found that combining CHS and RHS would create more synergies than I had realized. As just one example, staff recommended moving the Refugee Services office from the CHS site to the RHS site, where it could help not only the CHS students moving to RHS but also the considerable number of refugee students already at RHS.

Yet the follow-up report also found several disadvantages to the UHS-to-CHS option, which I had not expected or were more significant than I expected.

1) Capital costs.

The projected one-time capital costs of the UHS-to-CHS option are substantial, probably \$2-2.5 million. Some higher cost estimates have circulated, but those are exaggerated because they include: (i) costs that are unlikely to occur, such as moving the Family Engagement Center currently at CHS; or (ii) costs that UHS has said it would cover with private fundraising; or (iii) costs that mainly represent deferred maintenance or facility problems that should be addressed regardless of whether the UHS-to-CHS proposal advances; or (iv) “wish list” program upgrades not directly connected to the proposal.

Even after excluding those items, however, the one-time costs are significant. They include the cost of moving the construction and culinary arts programs, estimated at around \$1.4 million, several hundred thousand dollars for facility upgrades at RHS to accommodate special populations (to match accommodations already in place at CHS), an additional bus, new athletic uniforms, possible HVAC repairs for rooms currently out of use at CHS, and smaller expenses such as signage changes, etc.

Additional general upgrades to the RHS site, which the UHS-to-CHS proposal would not require but which could help to make RHS a more attractive “new school,” could easily raise the one-time cost to \$3 million. I have assumed throughout that the win-win goals of the UHS-to-CHS proposal would require significant new investments at RHS.

2) Strong opposition from RHS, with uncertain consequences for incoming CHS students.

School consolidation initiatives generally and understandably generate strong opposition from schools identified as closure candidates. The opposition from CHS was thus expected and reflects some legitimate issues. The sharp opposition from RHS, which would gain total control of its large site and a large infusion of new resources, caught me by surprise.

The follow-up report incorporated reports from each of the three site councils. More than a quarter of the (written) report from the RHS site council, and most of the first 6 minutes of its December 12 presentation to the board, focused on what RHS apparently views as the undesirable qualities of CHS students. These include: more discipline and attendance problems, higher fractions of special education students and English language learners, and lower test scores. RHS expressed concern about the threat to its state letter grade (currently “C”).

The RHS administration and site council also made brief and appreciated references to welcoming all students and doing whatever is necessary to help their transition, but the louder message was that RHS does

not want the CHS students. RHS also expressed concern about being flooded with CHS staff members who are help special education students (“

(The CHS site council report also expressed fear of integration. CHS expressed concern that its special population of students would have trouble integrating with the more typical population at RHS.)

In some respects, the differences between the student populations seem exaggerated. In last year's AzMERIT exams, the Math passing rate at RHS was 14% (down from 19% two years ago), while at CHS it was 10%. The percentage of Latino students is higher at RHS than at CHS, 59% versus 46%, but the difference is not extreme. If anything, combining the two populations advances the integration goals of the desegregation plan.

The RHS reaction does however raise a concern: would the CHS students (and staff) be well-treated in practice, or would they suffer from resentment at UHS's departure and their arrival? To put this another way: how much effort and resources would be required to ensure that the CHS students would be well-received?

- 3) *The difficulty of participating in after-school or weekend programs at RHS, given that many CHS families do not have cars.*

We do not have data on car ownership, but indirect evidence suggests that it is low at CHS. This is a relatively minor problem for getting to school, because those who live close to CHS are far enough from RHS to get bus service, but it is a greater problem for activities after school or at other times.

The pressing nature of the UHS/RHS problem.

The RHS reaction to UHS's October proposal seems to reflect, in part, the chronic friction between the UHS and RHS administrations, which is (as I discussed in the October letter) one reason that the status quo is deteriorating. This is not intended as criticism of any current administrators. The friction is the natural consequence of having two coequal captains, commanding different constituencies on the same overcrowded ship – a weird and I think unsustainable management model.

RHS's public comments show the depth of the friction. At the December board meeting, RHS's official representatives decried the plan as “hatched in secrecy” (which is inaccurate, as discussed below), and a “hostile takeover attempt.” RHS decried the “sense of entitlement and privilege emanating from this plan,” and the promotion of “enrichment activities to the most resource-rich students in our district, at the educational expense of the most needy,” which RHS found “really ugly.” RHS dismissed the UHS students as a “small elite percentage of students” who “find success regardless of their environment.”

CHS's 11-minute presentation to the board was, in comparison, a model of restraint. Following RHS's 20-minute presentation, UHS's 8-minute presentation mostly recapitulated its previous arguments and praised the three-school process that produced the follow-up report.

Comments on the process and closure processes generally.

Most school closure processes are contentious, which leaves the district with a difficult choice. At one extreme, staff can keep the process internal and simply announce its final recommendations. That was the Pfeuffer administration's strategy when it proposed four elementary closures, and that was how the Pedicone administration proposed the closure of Santa Rita High School. This strategy invites criticism as a secret or backroom process, and it requires resolute support from the board. Lacking such support, all of those proposals failed.

At the other extreme, the district could conduct a completely open process, putting all schools on the table for consideration and public analysis and comment. This is a recipe for widespread fear and uncertainty, and it can set schools against each other as they compete for survival. So districts rarely use that approach. The closest precedent in TUSD was Fagen's strategy of asking schools to propose their own consolidations, with the inducement of extra resources if they did. (In the end, there were insufficient volunteers and some closures were coerced.)

A high school closure process is especially tricky, because past and present students and their families often identify strongly with their high school. High school rivalries also tend to be the most intense. This may be why TUSD's previous closure processes mostly tiptoed around the high schools – leaving that problem for some future board and administration. And so here we are.

From May through December, this year's process was relatively open. In May the board cast a *public* vote to ask the UHS site council, with Central's assistance, to produce a preliminary report by October. The Open Meeting Law applies to site councils just as to the board: anyone can attend their *public* meetings. The site council produced the report by the *publicly* adopted deadline, leading to a *public* presentation to the board. The board then voted *publicly* to request the follow-up report on the UHS-to-CHS option, with a late November deadline. Then a similar public process unfolded, except now with three site councils. Only after receiving the follow-up report did the board vote to shift to an internal process and wait for staff's further analysis and recommendations.

Giving each affected school dedicated time to express its concerns publicly to the board, as occurred in December, is (as far as I know) unprecedented for a TUSD closure process.

Indeed, I heard few complaints about the process (though the vote to start it had been 3-2) until it became clear in September which recommendation UHS would make in the preliminary report. Then people started saying that the process was biased toward UHS. That concern (though a bit late) was understandable, but the original problem, from my viewpoint, was that after waiting for years for any progress on high school reconfiguration, including board direction in 2013 that was ignored, UHS was the one interested party that would reliably take the ball and run with it. (One management principle, too often ignored in TUSD, is to assign a task to someone who has passion for it.) Once UHS had completed the 25-page preliminary report, the board initiated a much larger process that, through the excellent coordination of Central, gave all three site councils equal opportunities to contribute to the 140-page follow-up report. I especially appreciated the report from CHS, which added much relevant new information, compared to what was in the preliminary report.

UHS's preliminary report, which analyzed several options, did not ultimately recommend the option that was probably the easiest for UHS. Its recommendation to move to CHS may or may not turn out to be the best choice, but I give the UHS site council credit for trying to take into account broader district interests, including the advantage of consolidating the CHS and RHS programs into one larger set of programs that could benefit all of the students currently split between the two schools.

The preliminary report made a strong enough case for UHS-to-CHS that it made sense for the follow-up report to focus on that option alone (and even that produced 140 pages). Given that report, I think that the decision to switch to an internal staff analysis, which should consider all reasonable options, makes sense. We are following a process, making a decision at each point as we proceed.

The staff recommendations, which may extend beyond consolidations to program changes and boundary adjustments, will presumably reassure most schools that they are in no imminent danger of closure. Trujillo understands that the current uncertainty requires quick resolution. The research already done provides a good starting point for this next step.

UHS's unjustified reputation as a white upper-class enclave.

The current debate has made it clear that UHS still suffers from out-of-date stereotypes. Its student population deviates significantly from TUSD averages, but it is not majority white, as a recent *Star* editorial wrongly asserted. This year's UHS students are 46% Anglo and 35% Latino and 10% Asian, which is quite diverse by most external standards and close to the ethnic composition of Pima County. (To the extent that ethnic diversity is an issue for UHS, the problem is not that too many students are white but that only 3% of its students are African American.)

UHS is justly proud of its record for annually producing more Hispanic National Merit Scholars than any other high school in the United States. That makes UHS not just a local but a national asset. Tucson should be proud of that, rather than pulling UHS down with an "elitist" tag.

UHS also has a high fraction of low-income students, judging by the fraction of its students who receive federally-subsidized free or reduced-price lunches, which has recently exceeded 40%.

Opponents of giving UHS its own campus have some valid arguments, but the frequent subtext that UHS's expansion is an expression of upper-class white privilege is inaccurate and frustrating.

My next letter will recap the new board's achievements (and shortcomings) in 2017 and discuss urgent priorities for the next few months.

Thanks again for your interest in TUSD.

- Mark