

MEMORANDUM

To: Mary Gulbransen, Jane Bellmore
Members of the Memorial/West Long Range Planning Task Force
Property Owners of Residents of Swan Creek, Fitchburg
From: Jerry Eykholt, representative from Midvale Elementary
Date: 1/10/2006
Re: Response and Partial Solutions to Concerns of Swan Creek Neighbors

With this memo, I hope to offer a response to Swan Creek's concerns about joining the Midvale-Lincoln pair. Before I address the main concerns raised in their note dated December 27, 2005, I hope to suggest another way to bring Swan Creek's children to the Midvale-Lincoln pair.

New way for Swan Creek to Join the Midvale-Lincoln Pair

The idea is to move Swan Creek to Lincoln Elementary only. This eliminates the concerns of a long bus ride for Swan Creek. The modification involves a slight uncoupling of the pair, without damage to the foundations or spirit of the pair. At Lincoln, K-2 space would be added. Lincoln already has the Open Classroom, students in that age group already attend Lincoln. At Midvale, classrooms in grades 3-5 would be added. This could be accommodated by a 2/3 split and a 4/5 split. As part of this general plan, the Open Classroom concept could also be modified. With the changes, some K5 students could attend Lincoln only or Midvale only. This would largely accommodate the space need for the far east (Swan Creek) and far southern portions of Leopold.

I suggest the same strategy for the far eastern portion of Thoreau (near Park St.). If you look at a map of student density in the Thoreau area south of the Beltline Hwy., between Park and Fish Hatchery, you'll see a distinct region of students living closer to Leopold and another set living within a block or two from Park St.

At Midvale, enrollment would also likely increase, given the increased access to classrooms in grades 3-5. Since space would be limited, most Midvale-area students would still go to Lincoln.

This modification would reduce overall busing, provides a better balance on low-income at both campuses within the pair, and provides significant relief to space needs of Leopold.

Addressing the Main Concerns Raised By Swan Creek Neighbors

This idea addresses many, but not all, of the concerns (bullet points) raised by the residents of Swan Creek:

1. Increases of current income disparity at Leopold. This concern would likely remain and would not be addressed by this change. However, the overall income disparity at

Lincoln or Leopold is not so heavily affected by incorporation of Swan Creek, since there are only 21 students.

2. Increase in current minority level at Leopold. This is tied to low-income. However, one must mention that racial diversity is fairly high at Leopold and nearly ideal at Lincoln (roughly equal percentages of four main races). Midvale-area residents have found that, with the higher level of services provided for a high-needs population (such as bilingual, special ed., and ESL), kids with lower needs also get greater access to the teachers and other resources. In the cases of my three children, I have been amazed by the low class sizes and the one-on-one attention our children receive from the teacher, student teacher, and volunteers in the classrooms. In this process, MMSD should help communicate how greater diversity is positive. In addition, Swan Creek families could really have a positive role on the learning conditions at Lincoln.

3. Decrease in standardized test scores. When scores are separated on the basis of income levels, Midvale-Lincoln students perform as well or better than their peers at other neighboring schools. Our low-income students outperform low-income peers at Thoreau. I haven't made the comparisons with Leopold, but I would be surprised if a completely different trend is observed. The greater risk at Midvale-Lincoln is that the level of needs (vs. resources) will continue to grow to a point where conditions may adversely impact low-income students (not enough resources for the needs). That is why MMSD wants to balance out low-income disparity, and Swan Creek can help out to some degree at Midvale-Lincoln.

4. Length of bus ride. The length of the bus ride is greatly reduced. The bus ride to Lincoln may actually be shorter to Lincoln than it is to Leopold.

5. As a result of long bus rides a child's zest for school drops dramatically which has a dramatic affect on achievement. The bus ride to Lincoln will be short. However, I'm not aware of any studies that show loss of performance or interest in school because of bus time.

6. Safety issues with such a long bus ride. The safety concerns are mainly with pickup, standing near idling buses, and drop off. I'm not aware of any injuries on the bus from M-L in the past 7 years. However, there was a horrible accident at Lincoln several years ago, when a child suddenly ran between the buses to the street and was struck by a car and killed. Since the new bus loop was added at Lincoln, it's a much safer situation. Thank you, MMSD!

7. Child behavioral issues on the bus ride of that length. I think there are ways to encourage positive behaviors and to deal with problems when they arise, regardless of ride length. For longer bus rides, kids often learn to manage their time by reading, playing games, setting up play dates, and finding other positive ways to interact.

8. Creating an even longer day for young children. This Lincoln solution takes care of that concern. However, time on the bus is not wasted by kids. They interact.

9. Further burdening the parents of Swan Creek and Lincoln/Midvale to get children to school if they miss the bus or busses are stuck in traffic. This concern is also greatly reduced because of the Lincoln solution. We have very consistent busing times at Midvale/Lincoln. Driving from the Midvale area to Lincoln takes about 10-15 minutes. It's not a big deal for people with cars. It is a much bigger concern for people with limited means, and yet many of our longer bus rides in MMSD involve kids from low-income families.

10. Neighborhood schools help a community grow, the Lincoln/Midvale proposal distances us even farther apart from being close to our children. All are welcome at Midvale-Lincoln, and we want parents to have close relationships with their children. Swan Creek is not within a walk boundary to Leopold. Without an expansion at Leopold, Swan Creek and the far southern portion of Leopold remain vulnerable to boundary changes. At Midvale-Lincoln we hope to be a paired community - and we are concerned not only with our own neighborhood, but all neighborhoods that are drawn to our school.

11. Neighborhoods become proud of their neighborhoods. I don't see how joining an excellent school would lower your sense of pride in your neighborhood. The difficulty comes, in spades, when the targeted school is blighted publicly without good information and without a chance to succeed in terms of public involvement and perceptions.

12. Parent involvement. We value and welcome parent involvement at Midvale-Lincoln, too. If Swan Creek joins Lincoln, we'd be very welcoming and encourage you to become involved.

13. Children are not as enthusiastic to participate in after school activities because of the hardships they and their parents are put through with a proposal such as Lincoln/Midvale. I'm not sure what is meant by this. We have many fun after-school activities that are popular with our students. We think they would be popular with new kids, too. Swan Creek parents are certainly welcome to visit Lincoln or Midvale, to observe the after school activities or to monitor the enthusiasm of our children.

14. The shift in school also has a negative impact on property values, due to all the above. Property values are due to perceptions. Maybe we should work on the perceptions. Property values did drop significantly in the Midvale area as a result of the pairing decision 25 years ago. Until recently, the Midvale area has seen a real lag in young family growth and retention – and this could be due to negative perceptions regarding the pair. There is gradual improvement. However, Swan Creek could do it right. They could take an active role of engagement in the public schools, work to improve the learning conditions for all students in the Madison area, and people would see that they have a good experience with Lincoln. Then, in addition to getting an outstanding education for their children, they would likely see their property values maintained or increased.

Finally, I'd like to add my own points for why I supported the general option of welcoming Swan Creek to Midvale-Lincoln (and now just Lincoln only):

1. Reduces overcrowding at Leopold. This is, by far, the most important reason. Overcrowding poses significant, daily challenges for learning.
2. Better utilizes space available at Midvale-Lincoln with K5 students.
3. Busing distance, at least to Lincoln, is nearly equivalent to Leopold. Of the options considered that would draw Swan Creek away from Leopold, transportation to Lincoln is the shortest. Like the neighbors of Swan Creek, I would like to see a systematic reduction in busing miles, as measured by the mixed variable of student-miles. The improvement would yield lower transportation expenses, overall energy burden, and pollution.
4. Reduces low-income percentage at Midvale-Lincoln. While Leopold low-income is a concern, the situation at Midvale-Lincoln and the overall extent of poverty are more severe at Midvale-Lincoln. Bringing in an involved, youthful, and resourceful neighborhood into Lincoln could really make a positive impact. Also, reducing the low-income percentage at Lincoln would increase west-side attendance and acceptance by more of those from the Midvale area.
5. Academic performance of Swan Creek kids is not likely to be impaired and could be closely monitored. Other than the obvious disruption of changing schools, I have seen no negative impacts on the academic performance of kids who were not classified as low-income that can be explained from attendance at Lincoln or Midvale. The district and the school take academic performance very seriously, of course. The guiding principal behind the pairing was that high-performing kids do as well or better than their peers at other schools, and low-performing kids do better when exposed to high-performing kids. Ability, intelligence, and high-income are not synonymous. I believe that academic, racial, and economic diversity is a positive thing at Lincoln – as it is at Leopold.
6. Some of the same kids will be learning together at Cherokee Middle School and West High School (and to a lesser extent, Wright Middle School). This option, compared to options that would draw some Leopold kids to Chavez or Franklin-Randall, provides better continuity for the students as they transition to middle and high school.
7. Please note that I am also in support of the options that would expand Leopold and build a new school on the far west side. I think the growth data and projections clearly support expansion of our building stock to areas of growth. However, I also think we need to be prepared with options that increase our overall efficiency as a district – even in the case that a referendum would fail. That's why we need to talk now about particular boundary changes.

If you would like to talk further with me or other members of our fine Midvale-Lincoln community, please feel free to contact me (I'm in the book). You may also want to visit the school's website (<http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/midlinc/edindex.htm>).