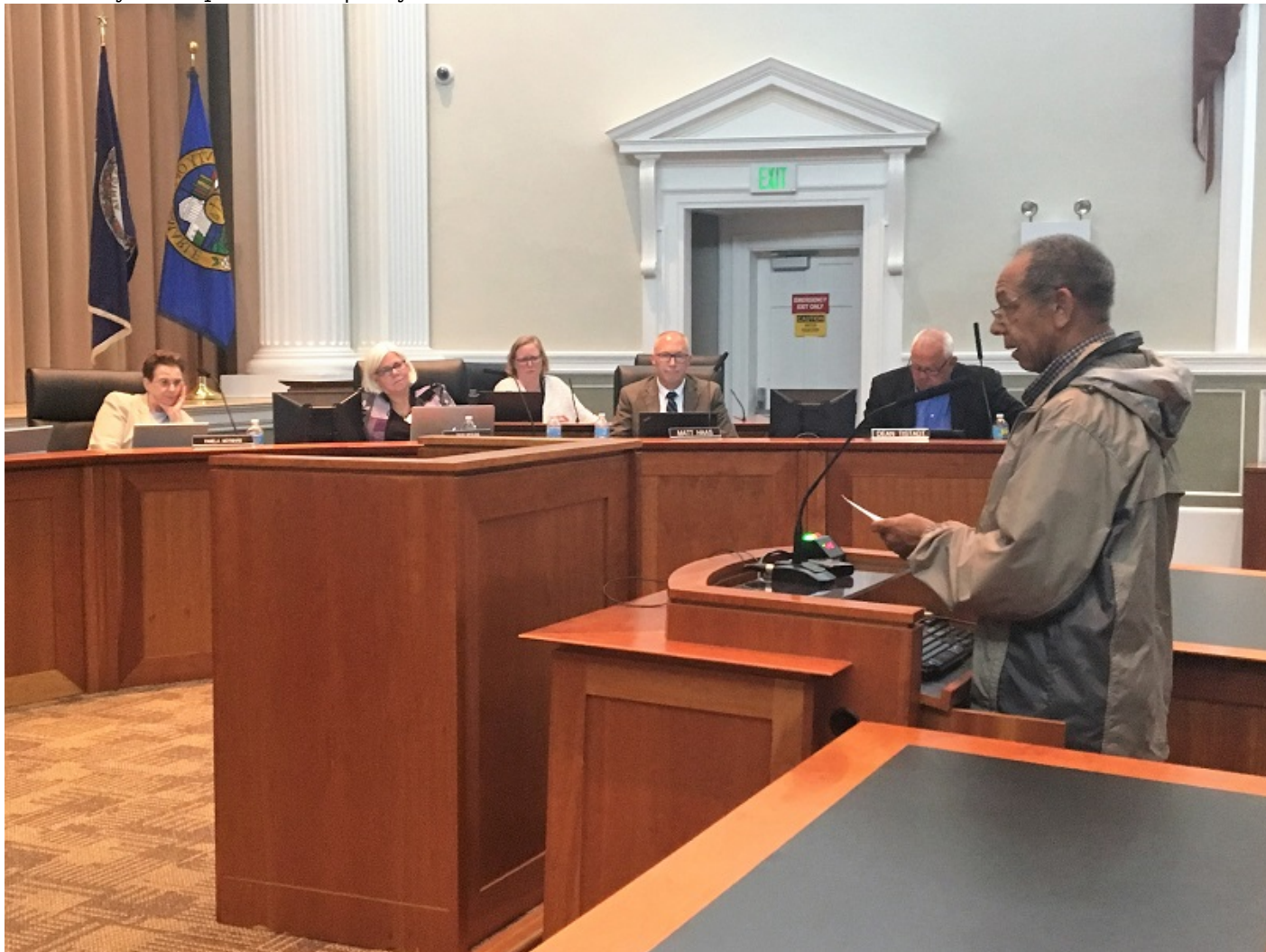


School Board to hold consolidation hearing on Yancey Elementary
written by Newspack Team | May 12, 2017



The Albemarle County School Board will vote on whether to close B. F. Yancey Elementary School after holding a public hearing on May 25.

Yancey was the only Albemarle County school denied accreditation by the state in 2016 after falling short of performance benchmarks for Standards of Learning assessments.

The school's enrollment has fallen by nearly 30 percent since it peaked in 2008. Division staff informed the School Board at its April 27 meeting that fewer than 105 students could enroll next year.

Yancey also is in danger of losing \$395,000 next year in federal grants that support educational programs and services.

Virginia law requires local school boards obtain public comment through a public hearing before consolidating schools. The School Board could choose to close within the next month or in June 2018, or opt to keep it open indefinitely.

Yancey's students would be redistricted to Red Hill Elementary and Scottsville Elementary if the school were to close.

On Thursday, the School Board voted 4-3 to schedule the public hearing for its next regular meeting on May 25. School Board members Jason Buyaki, Stephen Koleszar and Graham Paige cast the dissenting votes.

"[This motion] does not commit to one solution," said School Board member Jonno Alcaro. "It's opening up all the different possibilities and keeping them alive so that, if decisions are made...we have the process in the works."

Twenty-four people urged the School Board not to close Yancey in public comments at Thursday's meeting, which had dozens more in attendance.

Phil Giaramita, spokesman for the county school division, said in an interview that he suspected the School Board would decide Yancey's fate immediately after the public hearing on May 25.

Chairwoman Kate Acuff said she was not convinced that Yancey offered its students a better education than they could receive at Red Hill or Scottsville.

"I am not in any way undercutting the hard work [Yancey's] teachers have done," Acuff said. "It is just too small."

School Board member Pam Moynihan said on Thursday she was tired of the School Board "throwing money" at Yancey Elementary and not seeing academic improvement.

"I think the problem is that the school is too small... I don't want to keep throwing money at it if we can fix the problem by moving students to other schools," she said.

Moynihan said she hoped the school building could be remain open as an early childhood center, or for some other community use.

David Oberg said he was still unsure what was best for Yancey's students. He asked division staff to explore the possibility of keeping Yancey open as a charter school.

Oberg said growing up in Alaska made him appreciate the significance of having a school in a small, rural community.

"When Nikiski, Alaska got its own high school, it was a huge source of pride," Oberg said. "It did not make economic sense to build that school, but it did make societal sense."

Oberg also said that he was aware of Yancey's academic performance issues. "It would be a disservice to the students to not acknowledge that," he said.

Buyaki said he would support the use of funds from the school division's budget to make up for the loss of grant funding at Yancey. He said he wanted more information before scheduling a public hearing.

"I'm a bit disgusted at the timing of this," he added. "This is something we should have been looking at far earlier this year."

Acuff said the School Board's quarterly updates on Yancey, held regularly at meetings since last year, had provided sufficient information.

Koleszar said he wanted to know if any research had determined the ideal enrollment for a small, rural elementary school.

"I've always valued our small elementary schools... I'm willing to pay more for those schools if they are better for the education of [rural] kids," Koleszar said.

Paige said more time was needed to gauge the effectiveness of turnaround programs at Yancey paid for by federal grants in recent years.

Paige attributed Yancey's diminished enrollment to Albemarle County's restriction of development in rural areas, in conjunction with a 1974 redistricting that moved some Yancey students to Scottsville Elementary.

"Yancey has been the victim of a perfect storm," Paige said. "I don't think we can continually try to penalize the kids at Yancey for something that the county has enforced."

Julian Waters, a senior at Western Albemarle High School who is challenging Paige for the Samuel Miller District seat on the School Board, called attention to a promising statistic from Yancey's most recent school climate survey in a public comment.

Ninety-seven percent of Yancey students said that doing well in school was important to them, exceeding the division average of 92 percent.

"These are not students who lack motivation," Waters said. "These are students who are dedicated, who are curious— students who care. These are students whose world might be torn apart if they were moved to Scottsville or Red Hill."

Cheryl Knight, a teacher at Yancey, said the School Board's consideration of closing the school was disheartening for her and fellow staff members.

"I simply ask you to consider other options," Knight said. "We want to make sure that your decision has the best interest of children in your minds, and in your hearts."

Many people who spoke in defense of Yancey described its historic significance for Albemarle's African-American community.

"We feel betrayed and put-upon yet again by... the presentation of the idea to close this gem of a school to balance the budget," said Waltine Eubanks, an Esmont native and former Albemarle County teacher.

In 2009, the School Board's Long Range Facilities Planning Advisory Committee recommended closing Yancey, Red Hill and Scottsville elementary schools and consolidating students in a new building near Walton Middle School.

The School Board ultimately followed superintendent Pam Moran's recommendation to maintain or renovate the three rural schools.

In her 2009 recommendation, Moran cited strong community support for the three schools and said there was insufficient evidence that their small size affected student achievement.

On Thursday, Moran said that Yancey had become one of Virginia's smallest public schools.

"The people that are here should be honored for caring so deeply about the school their families built for that community," Moran said. "But I think the Board has to wrestle with the data, as well as that emotion."

Moran said waiting until the summer to decide on the school's status for 2017-2018 would create an "incredibly difficult" situation for Yancey families and school division employees.

"The longer that you push out a decision, you're going to have to consider taking some of the options off the table," Moran said.

"If you want to delay it for a year, you would be living with a community that would be going through an entire year of owning that, emotionally," she added.

Moran suggested the School Board consider establishing a minimum enrollment for Yancey that would determine if the school would remain open in the future.

"It isn't fair to keep a community in a state of not knowing," she said.