

More Costly to Close Velarde

By Fred Nathan

The three school board members and central office administrators pushing to close Velarde Elementary School claim that closing the nationally recognized school will save approximately \$225,000 (less than one half of one percent of a projected district budget of more than \$47,950,000). They argue that it will help them close their \$1.9 million budget deficit next year.

In fact, as explained below, it will cost Española School District and taxpayers more to close Velarde Elementary than to keep it open. That will make the district's budget deficit worse, not better.

The savings figure has been something of a moving target. The district's central administrative office has stated at various times during the last three months that the savings would be \$198,000, or \$250,000, or \$332,000. The most recent savings figure was \$225,000, provided at last week's school board meeting.

In calculating that figure, central office administrators and school board members overlooked an important fact: the District receives more than \$196,000 annually from the state's small schools funding adjustment for Velarde Elementary School. If the district closes the school, that funding disappears too.

In addition, the scheme to consolidate the Velarde Elementary students into Alcalde Elementary means that Alcalde Elementary will lose its small schools funding adjustment of more than \$114,000 because the additional students it will receive from Velarde Elementary will put it 42 students over the limit to be eligible to receive funding. The scheme also puts Alcalde Elementary over its capacity, which would likely lead to new renovation expenses.

There are other obvious additional new expenses that were left out of the calculations for closing Velarde Elementary. For example, if the district closes Velarde Elementary, the district and taxpayers will incur annual recurring expenses for maintaining the school building until the district can find a buyer or lessor, which will likely take many years. These new expenses include insurance, heating the building in the winter so the pipes don't burst, and providing security to prevent the vacant building from being vandalized.

The school board and central office administrators have also omitted from their calculations the unnecessary legal expense that they are incurring daily by suing the state Public Education Department, which has twice rejected their request to close Velarde Elementary. These rejections occurred because the board did not vote to close the school in a

properly noticed public meeting and because the public was not given the opportunity to comment on the proposed closure. For a district that is currently running nearly \$2 million in the red, is it prudent to spend tens of thousands of dollars that they don't have on lawyers to bring a meritless lawsuit?

The human costs are even more concerning than the financial ones. Before deciding to close Velarde Elementary, the board should have considered how it would affect students in the classrooms, since student achievement is the true bottom line for schools.

Here the school board and interim Superintendent Bobbie Gutierrez should take a careful look at the decision by then Santa Fe Public Schools Superintendent Bobbie Gutierrez to close three small elementary schools in Santa Fe serving a population of low-income children (77 percent eligible for free and reduced cost lunch) and consolidate them all into a single school in 2010. As with Velarde Elementary, powerless students and parents were uniformly opposed to closure and the superintendent and board's decision to close the schools was justified by fuzzy math as a way to close a budget deficit, but ultimately ended up costing taxpayers more than simply allowing the schools to remain open.

In Santa Fe the academic performance of children whose schools were closed has suffered. For example, the percentage of students proficient in reading in the fifth grade at the three schools that were closed ranged from 52.4 to 70 percent in the year before they were closed. In the subsequent four years reading proficiency for the fifth grade for the consolidated school has ranged between 30 and 41.5 percent, a substantial decline.

This would be a good time for the District and its interim superintendent to pause and reconsider whether it makes sense to close Velarde Elementary, especially when it will make the district deficit larger, not smaller. Consider whether Velarde Elementary could also be used to provide pre-kindergarten for the communities of Alcade, Dixon and Velarde. And consider whether the savings needed to close the district's deficit would be better found in cuts at the central administrative offices (e.g., the \$50,000 for public relation services by 2 Smooth Advertising, which is owned by Rio Arriba County Commissioner Barney Trujillo) than in the classrooms of Velarde Elementary.

It is time to put the academic needs of students ahead of politics and keep Velarde Elementary open.

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