

▪ EDITORIAL ▪

Penny Wise And Pound Foolish?

The Santa Fe Public Schools board may have to rethink its plan to consolidate two more Downtown/east side elementary schools. Estimated costs for the project are now at \$14 million to start with, almost three times the original estimate, and \$28 million in total. Keep in mind that consolidating the schools was supposed to be a cost-saving measure, and was proposed in large part to save the district about a quarter of a million bucks in operating funds per year.

In case board members have forgotten their long division: According to the latest cost estimates, it will now take the district more than 100 years to recoup, through operational savings, the total cost of the consolidation project.

In the board's defense, it should be noted that operational funding comes from a different pile of money than capital improvement funding, and that the district — like so many others across the state and indeed the nation — is facing a tighter squeeze on operating dollars than on the budget for capital improvements, which are usually funded through bond issues approved by voters. So even if the board ultimately decides not to go ahead with the consolidation plan, combining Acequia Madre and Atalaya elementaries into one kindergarten through 8th-grade school, it will probably still have trouble finding that extra quarter of a million it costs annually to keep both schools open.

Nevertheless, there is a certain bottom-line logic to the notion that what the district is really looking at is spending \$28 million to save less than a hundredth of that amount. There is a similar logic — or more accurately lack of it — to the district's other consolidation plan, already under way, in which three other Downtown elementaries are to be consolidated into an even bigger K-8 school. There, too, the board elected to spend several million dollars to save substantially less than \$1 million a year in operating funds, and there, too, the cost of renovating the old junior high school that will house the consolidated school turned out to be more than previously estimated. (In this case, involving Alvord, Kaune and Larragoite elementaries, the difference between cost estimate and cost reality is only about a million bucks — at least so far.)

Many parents of the children who attended these five small elementary schools have been vociferous in their opposition to the consolidations for a number of reasons, not least of which has been the perception that the school board is being penny wise and pound foolish.

But the final insult — and the crowning illogic — may be this: Faced with the escalating costs of consolidation, the board may have to postpone spending \$7 million on improvements at one of the district's crowded south side elementary schools. Yet as anyone who has followed the consolidation controversy knows, much of the justification for closing the Downtown schools was to save operating money that could then be spent at elementary schools on the city's rapidly expanding south side. Those schools are among the district's largest and most crowded, and it was argued that the older and smaller Downtown schools shouldn't be kept open at the expense of new schools serving growing areas of the city.

Under these circumstances, it will be very interesting to hear how the board justifies an increasingly costly consolidation plan while putting on hold badly needed improvements to the very schools that were supposed to benefit from it the most.