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# Closure Plan Expensive, Legally Questionable

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Given recent developments, it would be wise and prudent for the Santa Fe School Board to reconsider its school closure plan and consider alternatives.

To recap, the school board voted 4-1 on May 6 to close three small, neighborhood schools, Alvord, Kaune, and Larragoite, with Board Chairman Richard Polese dissenting.

According to district administrators, closing these three neighborhood schools and consolidating their 540 students in Alameda, a former middle school, would save \$972,000 in operating dollars. That is slightly more than 1 percent of the district's \$92 million operating budget. (The District's alleged savings have been disputed by others in the community who found numer-

ous errors and omissions and put the figure instead at closer to \$100,000.)

At the time, the cost of renovating Alameda was said to be \$7.5 million. That cost jumped by another \$1 million when the district discovered that Alameda was in worse shape than they thought and lacked, for example, fire sprinklers.

Everyone acknowledges that the final cost will be greater than \$8.5 million because the district cannot complete all of the renovations on their three-month timetable. Therefore the district is planning a Phase II at Alameda, but that price tag has still not been determined.

Meanwhile, the district is planning to close another small neighborhood school, Acequia Madre, in 2011-2012 and consolidate those students at Atalaya. In May, the public was told by the district that the cost of renovating Atalaya would be \$5 million. Late

last week the school board disclosed that figure had ballooned to \$28 million.

These developments suggest that perhaps it would be prudent for the district to determine the total price tag at Alameda before proceeding on those renovations. Recall that the original reason given the public to close these small neighborhood schools was to save taxpayer dollars.

The high cost of school closures raises more questions. For example, where is the district going to find the \$36.5 million plus to renovate both Alameda and Atalaya? The district says that it can divert proceeds from a \$160 million bond approved by voters last year for these school consolidation projects, even though they were never presented to or approved by voters.

Among the originally planned projects for the \$160 million was a more than \$7 million upgrade for Ramirez

Thomas Elementary School, including a new early childhood center and new kindergarten, art and science classrooms. Now the district says it intends to use those bond proceeds at Alameda instead. Might voters in the neighborhood around Ramirez Thomas feel that they are the victims of a bait and switch? How about the taxpayers across Santa Fe who voted in favor of the \$160 million bond but who do not support closing small neighborhood schools? If district administrators can divert \$36.5 million, could they then divert the entire \$160 million?

Enter three long time advocates for Santa Fe's public school children: Rep. Lucky Varela, Chairman of the Legislative Finance Committee, Sen. Nancy Rodriguez, a member of the Senate Finance Committee, and Sen. Phil Griego, who have requested an Attorney General's opinion

on the question of whether a school district can divert proceeds from a bond election for projects of a much different nature and character than those originally presented to and approved by voters. (Full disclosure: Think New Mexico worked closely with the legislators on the legal research behind the opinion request.)

It should be noted that in the months preceding the election, the district made numerous presentations about the bond election to the public, to staff and parents at Santa Fe schools, to the Santa Fe Chamber of Commerce, and many others. The presentations describe specific projects, their cost and rationale, and explain that they were selected through a master planning process which took place over many months and involved many public meetings. The projects were also listed in a Voter's Notebook, and published in Journal

Santa Fe.

Overlooked in the debate have been the children directly affected by the school closures, who are among the most vulnerable in our community: the students at Alvord are 63 percent low-income; Kaune students are 85 percent low-income; and Larragoite students are 79 percent low-income. Ironically, the national research indicates that low-income children benefit the most from small schools like the ones that the school board intends to close.

Think New Mexico has proposed an alternative plan: cut administrative costs, keep Alvord, Acequia Madre, Kaune, and Larragoite open, and rezone the district to give every elementary student in Santa Fe the opportunity to learn in a school of 400 or fewer students. Details are available on Think New Mexico's website: [www.thinknewmexico.org](http://www.thinknewmexico.org).