

## Rationale Supporting the Proposal to Close Morris Elementary School

For months now, the economic recession and the decline of the American economy have been at the forefront of the media. Like the economy in general, the weak condition of the Kansas economy is well known. Also commonly known is the extent to which the funding of public education impacts the overall expenditure of Kansas public funds. Well over half of public spending is dedicated to public education. The general fund budget of a school is determined by a state formula based largely upon the number of students as well as a variety of other factors. School districts must close their fiscal year with a balanced budget. Some other funds are available from the Federal Government, such as Special Education funds and Title funds; however, these must be spent in specific ways and may not be used for general budget purposes. Additionally for the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years, the Federal Government has allocated stimulus funds to help struggling state budgets, again, these funds must be spent in specific ways. Unfortunately, the Turner school district is facing a large budget reduction for the 2009-10 school year, how large is yet to be determined.

Kansas is in a financial shortfall with state revenues down more than \$150 million dollars. Current projections predict an even greater decline. These budget shortfalls are having a significant impact on all schools in Kansas, including our very own. Up to this point, we have been able to make cuts and shift funds without having a major impact on the community, schools, and ultimately, the classroom. Some of the cuts, to date, include:

- Eliminating overtime throughout the district
- Discontinuation of the driver education program
- Elimination of the Helping Teacher program
- Reduction of library services
- Reduction of athletic budgets and services
- Cutting strategically-identified classified, certified and administrative positions and associated costs
- Curtailing field trips

We have considered many additional options. With each option, we have always considered the impact on students to be the foremost priority, as well as the related, long term affects on the operation of the district. Other items we must take into consideration include rising health insurance, fuel, and utility costs, in addition to the loss of interest on idle funds. Most of our facilities are old and need a significant amount of work, and we believe we have an obligation to maintain our facilities at the highest possible quality. In addition, the district must continue to strive for comparability in staff salaries and benefits with neighboring districts, as our kids deserve the best teachers and support staff.

Over a year ago, at the end of the 2007-08 academic school year, we anticipated the district was facing a financial shortfall and that funding would soon be spiraling downward. We immediately began working to enhance and refine our fiscal practices in order to continue to function at a sound level of budget management. During the 2008-09 academic year, we have worked diligently to continue managing the district's resources and ensure the highest quality education for our students.

Unfortunately, the cuts continue to get deeper from the state. In addition, the assessed valuation of property in the district is also facing a decline, resulting in yet another negative impact on the district's budget.

Throughout this school year, as we prepared for potential budget cuts, we considered many options. We compiled a prioritized list based on impacts to the classroom. While no cuts are easy, the first round didn't have a direct impact on classrooms. As we faced the second round of cuts, we had exhausted the few remaining ways to make cuts of this magnitude without a huge impact to the community and classrooms. There were basically four ways to get to the dollars that would help cushion the shortfall, they included:

1. Reducing transportation – only students living 2.5 miles or further would be transported, in accordance with state statutes.
  - If bussing were eliminated for students who reside closer than 2.5 miles from the school they attend, the district would save at least \$400,000 dollars, but consequently the families of most elementary students would have to provide their own transportation to school, either by private car or by walking to school. Our roads and streets are not designed for students to walk, creating an unsafe environment for students.
2. Eliminating the district's contribution to classified health insurance (classified staff includes all employees not covered by the teachers' negotiated agreement, except administrators).
  - Many school districts do not contribute to health insurance for classified staff, at least not at the 98% level. However, this is considered to be a significant benefit to many of the Turner staff who live in the community.
  - Reducing classified health insurance contributions by 50% would save the district over \$450,000.
3. Reducing a large number of teachers, coaches, classified staff and administration.
  - The Board and district administration does not want to increase class size or decrease services provided for students and staff; nor do they desire to eliminate all sports and activities. Both of these options would be devastating to our students and, ultimately, student achievement.
  - A 5% budget reduction would have the effect of eliminating 25 – 30 staff positions, incorporating classified, certified and administration positions. For each percent of budget reduced, an additional number of staff reductions would result.
4. Closing Buildings.
  - The only building that could feasibly be consolidated into existing buildings is Morris. Morris is a one classroom per grade level school with declining enrollment. All students currently attending Morris could be reassigned to either Oak Grove or Turner Elementary. (The Morris enrollment has declined steadily for the past five years, from a

high of 135 students in the 04/05 school year to 94 this year. All figures exclude Pre-K and Kindergarten.

- Some patrons have questioned the benefits of maintaining the Turner Early Learning Center. In that regard, it is important to understand the strong research support for early literacy services, thus the importance of full day kindergarten. In addition, the TELC houses the district's at-risk pre-school program funded through grants from the Kansas State Department of Education. There are approximately 480 students enrolled at the TELC making it unrealistic to reintegrate them back into their home schools.

As the Board and district administration looked at the available options, nothing was desirable. However, Kansas law requires the district to close its books at the end of each fiscal year with a balanced budget. Armed with that fact, we had to reinforce our focus on making decisions that are best for kids and that would, at the same time, cause the least damage to the district as a whole. The choice came down to Morris Elementary, again not because it was desirable to do, but because it will result in the least damage to the whole. In addition, the class sizes are extremely small at Morris in comparison to the remainder of the district. All class sizes at Morris are smaller than the district-wide average—some as much as 50% smaller than the average class size in other district elementary schools. Thus closing Morris, we believe, is the best strategy to keep the district on track towards a balanced budget.

Under the Kansas Statute, 72-8213b, a Board of Education may close a school building by majority vote of the Board of Education after holding a public hearing on the possible closing. The hearing must be advertised twice. The hearings will be published in The Record, The Kansas City Star, and the district website.

The proposal being considered by the Board is to close Morris Elementary at the end of the 2008-09 school year and to reassign the Morris students to Oak Grove Elementary and Turner Elementary. There are maps available on the district website and posted in various district locations providing a visual picture of what would be the tentative distribution.

Some possible questions that arise out of the proposed closing that may be of interest include the following:

1. What will happen to the school building?	There is no plan to sell the property at this time. The facility would be vacated and remain empty to reduce utility and operational costs.
2. What will happen to the current staff?	Although the closure does reduce staff, the majority of the certified staff would be transferred to other currently vacant positions. Most reductions in staffing would be accommodated by positions currently open or through retirements; however, it is important to understand a number of actual positions would be cut as a result of the closure.

3. How much money will it save to close Morris?	The cost savings with the closure of Morris are estimated at approximately \$450,000 per year. These cost reductions are driven primarily by personnel cuts, but also include reductions in supplies, utilities, and other operating expenses.
4. Will there still be bus service?	Absolutely. All students in Turner would be provided bus service to and from their respective schools, assuming further reductions do not require a change in transportation policy.
5. Will Oak Grove and Turner Elementary be over-crowded?	Absolutely not. Oak Grove currently has several available classrooms. With the closing of Morris, both Oak Grove and Turner Elementary would gain approximately 2 classrooms each.
6. How big will the class size be at Oak Grove and Turner Elementary?	While the district does not have a policy on class size, we always try to maintain a number appropriate for teaching and learning. The class size would normally range from 18 to 25 depending on the grade level.

This proposed action, driven by a requirement to reduce expenditures, is no fun for anyone. As stated previously, no choice is desirable, but some action must be taken. Perhaps this statement from Board President, Randy Beery, says it best, “It doesn’t matter whether a student is a Morris Mustang, an Oak Grove Panther, a Junction Cardinal, a Turner Cub, or a Tiger from Midland Trail; they are ALL students in Turner. We are a community, and as a Board, we must make the best decisions for ALL students in our Turner Community.”