



Harlandale ISD trustees vote to close four elementary schools

By Camille Phillips March 28, 2023 at 1:46 PM CDT

Harlandale ISD trustees voted to close four elementary schools amid declining enrollment on March 27, 2023.

Harlandale trustees have voted to close Columbia Heights, Rayburn, Morrill and Carroll Bell elementary schools at the end of the school year.

District administrators recommended closing the schools to avoid a financial crisis amid declining enrollment.

Before the vote, several trustees said the decision was one of the most difficult ones they've made — and with elections coming up in May, Board President Norma Cavazos said she knows they may be judged for it.

“Judge me by saying that I am the one that would not allow a child to sit in a classroom wondering if a certified teacher was ever going to come in through that door,” she said.

Harlandale has not been able to fill about 55 teacher vacancies this year. Administrators hope consolidating schools will help them have fewer teacher vacancies next year.

Harlandale families and educators packed the school board meeting Monday night to weigh in on the closures.

Some people asked for specific schools to stay open. Others wanted the district to find another way to save money. But after holding four town halls,

several people also supported the closures in order to keep the district financially strong.

“For the past month, I've experienced everything from joy, sadness, hopefulness, worry, etc. and every other emotion — from one end of the spectrum to the other,” said Rayburn Elementary teacher Kimberly Machado.

Juan Cristan came with a large group of COPS/Metro community organizers who felt the announcement of the proposal to close schools came too close to spring break, making it more difficult for families to learn about the proposal and participate in town halls. He was also one of several speakers that asked the district to come up with a plan to better compete with charter schools.

“What are we going to do to stop the hemorrhaging?” Cristan asked. “What are we going to do to [stop having] the students go to KIPP, to IDEA, to Royal?”

Rayburn parent Esmeralda Campos said the school closures are one of many hard decisions Harlandale has had to make in its history in order to survive.

“It's a hard sting and heartbreaking to lose what we're used to, but the consolidation is necessary,” Campos said. “I would rather lose a few schools than see my beloved Rayburn teachers and other school personnel lose their jobs next year.”

Teachers and staff at the affected schools will keep their jobs.

District administrators said during the town halls that Harlandale would be forced to start laying off employees next January if budget cuts weren't made.

All seven Harlandale trustees voted to close four schools Monday night, but they split the vote between the district's original proposal to close Vestal Elementary and a suggestion from some community members to close Carroll Bell instead. The option to close Carroll Bell won the majority vote.

Instead of leaving the buildings empty, the district plans to repurpose them.

In an interview with TPR, Harlandale Superintendent Gerardo Soto said that while completely closing schools would save more money, it isn't what the community wants.

"We didn't want to leave an empty building in our community," Soto said, adding that it could lead to vandalism and invite crime.

Instead, the district plans to use money from the 2022 bond to repurpose the closed schools.

The bond approved by voters included a Career and Technical Education building and a multipurpose gym and theater building. The consolidation proposal trustees approved Monday frees up land for the multipurpose building and converts Carroll Bell into the CTE building. Soto said renovating an existing building instead of starting from scratch will reduce bond expenses by about \$14 million.

Harlandale can use bond money for renovations and construction because that was in the bond description approved by voters last year. Soto said some community members wanted to know why the bond couldn't be used to keep schools open longer, but the bond can only be used for renovation and construction, not to pay for salaries.

Consolidating schools, however, will allow the district to hire fewer employees and reduce the cost of salaries.

Soto expects that to happen naturally through attrition — the district on average loses 150-200 teachers a year to turnover. He has promised that no teacher or staff member will lose their job due to the consolidation.

"Us consolidating that resource, which is the most important right — our teachers — [allows us] to maximize the usage of our teachers. And so, when we combine schools, we're hoping that we don't have as many or any vacancies in front of our children," Soto said.

If the district ends up with more teachers than needed at the beginning of next year, Soto plans to hold onto them as a “bank” against teachers that quit in the middle of the year.

According to a demography study commissioned by the district, Harlandale has lost a quarter of its students since 2015, and it expects to lose another quarter by 2031. Harlandale is currently one of the larger school districts in south San Antonio, with about 12,000 students.

Soto said most schools in the district are currently about half full. Harlandale’s budget has a \$12 million deficit this year, and it would have accrued a similar deficit next year without budget cuts. Education funding concerns are heightened in districts this year as the end of federal COVID-19 relief funding looms. Attendance is also down statewide, which also reduces funding from the state.

Harlandale’s neighboring school district, South San ISD, also voted to close three schools last week.