

## Budget crunch pushes Harlandale ISD board to order school closures

By Elizabeth Sander

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Harlandale ISD Superintendent Gerardo Soto speaks at a town hall style meeting at McCollum High School last week about possible school closures. The district's board Monday voted 4-3 to close four schools this fall to fix a budget crisis caused by declining enrollment.

Jessica Phelps, Photojournalist / Jessica Phelps

Faced with the certainty of an unpopular decision weeks before board elections on May 6, trustees at the Harlandale Independent School District picked between two bad choices late Monday and voted to close four elementary schools to stave off a financial crisis.

But none of them ducked.

Speaking just before the vote, the board's president, Norma Cavazos, became emotional. She said it was better to close schools and ensure all students had certified teachers than risk having more of them taught by long-term substitutes in half-full classrooms.

“Not for one second do I want you to assume that I have not carried that responsibility with me every single day for months,” Cavazos told an audience that included many parents wearing T-shirts bearing the names of the affected schools.

Presented with two options, the board voted 4-3 to close Columbia Heights, Morrill, Rayburn and Carroll Bell elementary schools this fall, a list generated by community feedback as an alternative to the district's original proposal.

Some of the 18 speakers in public comments before the vote urged the board to reject the proposals altogether. Some said the closures made the most sense, no matter how painful.

Albert Luna said four generations of his family have gone to Carroll Bell Elementary, but he urged the board to "go with the best decision for the district."

Trustees were split between the two options in separate votes. Christine Carrillo, Louie Luna, Juan Mancha and Ricardo Moreno formed the majority for the second option. Cavazos and trustees Elizabeth Limon and Elaine Ayana-Ortiz favored the first option, which included the closure of Vestal Elementary instead of Carroll Bell.

The second option was based on community feedback during weeks of town hall meetings. Vestal had more room to grow than Carroll Bell, some had argued.

The school district is not the only one in the area to be trapped between declining enrollment numbers, difficulty hiring teachers and the costs of maintaining half-full neighborhood schools. South San Antonio ISD's board last week decided to close two elementary schools and a middle school, but took no action on a recommendation to reverse its 2019 decision to reopen a high school.

Harlandale ISD also has been surveying parents about the possibility of switching to a four-day school week.

In a presentation last week, Superintendent Gerardo Soto said the district's enrollment had dropped from 12,476 students in the 2018-2019 school year to 10,432 students this year.

Federal pandemic relief funding will no longer be available to make up for a \$12 million budget deficit next school year. Without cutting costs, the district would have to declare a financial exigency by January and lay off 300 staff members, Soto said.

“We have a problem. It’s a decline of enrollment,” he said. “Our solution is to keep our buildings open.”

The superintendent has promised to expand career and technical education programs and create a “makerspace” facility in the Jewel Weitzel Center, where students now in a post-secondary job training program would be transferred to the Frank Tejada Academy. The Scheh Building, which does not currently house students, also would be expanded and repurposed for wellness and fine arts.

Near the end of the public comments, a group of about 15 representatives of Communities Organized for Public Service/Metro Alliance urged the board to communicate more information in Spanish, some of them speaking in Spanish with English translations. Trustees responded by having their individual speeches before the school closure votes translated into Spanish.

A member of the COPS/Metro delegation, Juan Cristan, asked board members what they were going to do about the "hemorrhaging" of enrollment in Harlandale ISD.

Some parents have accused the district of seeking to close schools just to expand specific programs, but at last week's town hall, Soto cautioned them not to confuse “cause and effect.” He said his aim is to keep the campuses in use, because “no one in the community wants empty buildings.”

Others noted that IDEA South Flores, a charter school that competes with the district for students, has been handing out flyers in the parking lots of schools that were slated for possible closure. Soto said using the campuses of closed schools to expand the district's magnet programs and other offerings could help Harlandale keep students and recruit new ones.

The district plans to give educators at closed schools priority for which campuses they would like to move to. Auxiliary staff, including custodians and cafeteria workers, will move to other locations based on vacancies.

Maricruz Martinez, a second grade teacher at Vestal, said after Monday's vote that it makes logistical sense to close Carroll Bell rather than Vestal but she wasn't happy about closing any of the schools.

"I want to cry," she said.

Martinez attended Carroll Bell as a child and feels close to the campus, but she said it was "land-locked" and wouldn't be able to expand if enrollment ever grows again. Vestal has more parking than Carroll Bell and can accommodate a larger student population.

Under the plan the board adopted, the Harlandale Care Center will be relocated to Morrill Elementary, the first school ever built in Harlandale ISD.

Mancha said the biggest impact a school district can have on its students is with its staff.

"The teachers are going to make them who they're going to be, not the campus, not the building. It's the connection you make with the children," he said.

Luna ended his speech with a grito, and the few dozen still in the audience joined him: "Que viva Harlandale! Que viva Harlandale!" Long live Harlandale.

The final vote was greeted by commotion from the Vestal staff and families: claps, yells and hugs. Participating in a public process, they had been able to save their school.

Families and staff from Carroll Bell left quietly. They could not say the same.