

## Wayne Central may close 1 or 2 schools

**Cited: Lower enrollment, budget woes**

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Faced with declining enrollment and mounting budget woes, the Wayne Central School District in Wayne and Monroe counties will likely close one or two of its primary schools as part of a larger building realignment.

There are currently three schools serving grades K-5: in the northern part of the district, Ontario Primary is K-2 and Ontario Elementary is 3-5. In the southern part of the district (Walworth), Freewill Elementary is K-5. There is then a 6-8 middle school and 9- 12 high school. A study commissioned by the district earlier this year lays out the case that the current arrangement is unsustainable. Districtwide enrollment in 2014-15 was 2,289, down 16 percent from 2,731 a decade earlier. Class sizes in all five district buildings are well below the district's stated benchmarks. In fourth grade, for instance, the district requires there be no more than 25 students in a class, but the three fourth-grade classes at Freewill have only 15 students each, according to the study. The 82-page study proposes five alternate approaches, all involving closing at least one building. The most aggressive plan would close both Ontario Elementary and Freewill, consolidating students into the remaining three buildings.

That plan, according to the study, would save the district between \$2.6 and \$3.3 million annually due to savings in employee and building operation costs. The other plans are projected to save between \$1.2 and \$1.8 million; the district's total budget for 2016-17 is \$47.1 million.

After the study was released earlier this year, a focus group of about 30 community members met to discuss it during an all-day session earlier this month. Their feedback will be formally presented to the school board Oct. 20; Superintendent Mathis Calvin III will make his recommendation Oct. 25; and the board will decide on a course of action Nov. 3.

In an online petition, many parents have mobilized against the possibility of closing both Ontario Elementary and Freewill. The petition says "it has come to our community's attention that (closing both schools) is still being recommended by our superintendent, even though it was the very last choice of the focus group."

District spokeswoman Amy Gebhardt denied Calvin has already made a decision. The final decision will belong to the school board, which can choose any of the five choices or some combination of them.

"We honestly have made no decisions," Gebhardt said. "I don't know where that's coming from."

The focus group preferred two other options, both of which would close Ontario Elementary and expand Ontario Primary to serve more students. One of their biggest concerns with closing two schools is that it would make the high school 712, which they believe is an inappropriate setting for middle-schoolers.

Wayne is not unique in debating how to proceed with declining enrollment. Suburban and rural schools across New York face similar challenges; the difficulty is greater for rural schools, though, since they usually cover a greater geographical area, making consolidation more difficult.

The district includes parts of Macedon, Ontario, Walworth and Williamson in Wayne County and Penfield

and Webster in Monroe County.

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**Freewill Elementary School in Walworth.**

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