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Comal ISD approves second School of Choice

Facility will open this fall on Spring Branch MS campus

By Lisa Dreher | The Herald-Zeitung

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Mikala Compton

Comal Independent School District trustees on Tuesday approved the district's second School of Choice, which will open next school year.

Comal ISD trustees voted 7-0 to turn a portion of Spring Branch Middle School, located at 21053 TX-46 in Spring Branch, into the district's second "High School of Choice." These schools prepare students for college-level coursework and use project-based learning focusing on STEAM — science, technology, engineering, art and math.

Students develop college and career readiness and graduate with a high school diploma and an associate's degree. The district's only school of this kind is Memorial Early College High School in the U.S. 281 corridor.

The incoming freshmen expected at the new High School of Choice will come from students attending middle schools in the west side of the district, including Spring Branch, Smithson Valley, Pieper Ranch and Mountain Valley middle schools.

Steve Stanford, the district's executive communications director said about 50 ninth-graders will attend next year, housed in a dozen classrooms in one wing of Spring Branch MS. The district plans to install a wall separating the new facility from the middle school, with separate security systems, cameras and assigned identifications.

The school is projected to be ready by the fall, and it will be funded by the district's budget rather than the 2020 bond.

However, some parents expressed frustration, saying they needed more information, especially recent details of its planned location on another district campus. While trustees said the school has been discussed during regular meetings, and the co-location discussed during a Comal Forward meeting in November, parents said it wasn't discussed enough.

Rachel Cumming said outside of the basics nothing else was communicated consistently, such as through email or school visits. She said the district was good about publicizing the 2020 bond, but the new School of Choice "threw everyone for a loop."

"They didn't answer any of our questions at our board meeting," Cumming said Friday. "Board members just addressed the team that had the renovations and remodeling and that was it."

Others were concerned about the interactions between the middle and high schoolers, despite the security and concrete wall dividing them.

"I have a sixth-grader; she's 11," SBMS parent Felicia Avalos said on Friday. "As the years progress she will be with 17- and 18-year-olds on a campus and they're that close together with such a huge immaturity gap."

Prior to the vote, trustees reminded of the need for the second Choice school and its location on the district's western areas. Jason York, board president, said discussions have centered on that over the past 10 years, before the district opened Memorial Early College High School.

"We have been talking about this School of Choice for numerous years," York said. "For years, those of us in the 281 corridor didn't want to be driving over here."

Addressing security, York said close proximity between Church Hill Middle School and Memorial Early College High School has demonstrated safety won't be a concern. Board Secretary Michelle Ross, who asked which measures would be installed, was told the district has an agreement with Bulverde Police Department to provide law enforcement services at the school, which will share school resource officers.

Outgoing Trustee Denise Kern said administrators "need to keep listening" to security questions, concerns and suggestions.

"I don't want my children going to a prison," Kern said. "I don't think we have created that. I do think we have addressed the safety concern ideas."

Another parent, Heath Renfrow, was frustrated about the lack of information on construction.

"They put out this beautiful plan with security features but no timeline or schedule," Renfrow said Friday. "I know how construction works, fencing, contracts ... There's no way they're going to have all of that implemented by the school year."

Stanford told the *Herald-Zeitung* remodeling will begin now and continue throughout the summer.

Cumming said she is also concerned about using money for this co-location rather than helping other existing schools that lack enrollment.

Board Vice President David Drastata said co-locating the schools was discussed two years ago and deemed fiscally responsible. He said he would talk with anyone about their concerns, but insinuations that the board is not being transparent and is fiscally irresponsible "ring hollow."