

ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

'Still they chose to close our school': T.C. Miller, Sandusky elementary schools on the line after school board vote

Emma_Martin

Sep 21, 2023



Community members with T.C. Miller Elementary School for Innovation react during the Lynchburg City School Board meeting. Paige Dingler photos, The News & Advance

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T.C. Miller Elementary School for Innovation parents reacted to the Lynchburg City School Board's decision Tuesday night with tears, anger and disbelief — T.C. Miller and Sandusky elementary schools will be either closed or repurposed in the near

future, part of a facilities master plan scenario the board adopted to address declining enrollment and aging infrastructure across the division.

“They say that the best interests of the children were at heart and yet they voted exactly the opposite. So I feel very betrayed and I feel like this was fairly rehearsed,” T.C. Miller parent Carly Sheaffer said outside the LCS administration building after the vote.

“They say ‘we want community input’ — we show up to the community meetings. They say ‘we want community input’ — we fill out surveys. They say ‘we want community input’ — we come and give public comments and break records for how many people attended the school board meeting, and still they chose to close our school,” Sheaffer said.

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The board had just voted 5-4 in favor of Vice Chair Martin Day’s motion to adopt scenario three of four facilities master plans prepared for the board by consultant group MGT of America, and released to the public in July. That scenario calls for the closure of Sandusky and closure or repurpose — likely to a pre-K facility — of T.C. Miller.

Scenario three also calls for division-wide rezoning for close-to-home attendance; and renovations and/or expansions to Perrymont, Linkhorne, Bedford Hills, Paul Munro and Robert S. Payne elementary schools.

The estimated 10-year capital cost for that scenario is \$206.5 million. It's estimated to save the division \$4.5 million in fiscal year 2030.

Also part of Day's motion was an additional request of Lynchburg City Council for \$15 million to fund expansions and renovations at W.M. Bass Elementary School to accommodate the additional students expected to be assigned there with close-to-home zoning.

His motion was a departure from the finance and facilities committee's recommendation at the Sept. 5 school board meeting.

"Since then it's clear that a number of people are not real comfortable with what the facilities and finance recommended because it was not one of the four scenarios produced by MGT," Day said before making his motion.

"Now I cannot unilaterally change what the facilities and finance committee's recommendation is, but what I do want to do is as an individual board member is make a motion for what I think the board needs to do at this point," he said.

According to LCS Deputy Superintendent Reid Wodicka, any of the four facilities master plan scenarios would take years to develop. Closing Sandusky and T.C. Miller would affect about 570 students enrolled at the elementary schools in 2022.

Board member Randall Trost was among the four votes against, and said his concerns were about the timeline for the project.

"I don't want to be moving these children twice and I just don't see how we'd be ready to move these children and house them in another facility until the Bass expansion was done and other schools were renovated," Trost said.

"It's too many unknowns at this point," board member Sharon Carter said. Her objections to Day's motion drew applause from the audience, which again filled almost every seat in the LCS board room.

“We talk about parental input, the governor won on parental input. We have a lot of people on city council talk about parental input. We talk about it. We have new people talk about it like we never did — the old board members. Didn’t 70% of the input from parents say No. 1, so we can ignore some voices of parents if they don’t fit into our criteria?” Carter said.

LCS conducted a community survey of the four scenarios that garnered 1,372 respondents from residents. On a scale of one to 10, the average approval score for scenario three was 4.75, the second lowest among the four scenarios. Scenario one had the highest approval score from the community, at 6.97.

Carter then moved to amend Day’s motion and for the board to instead adopt scenario one. The board ultimately voted 6-3 against her motion.

Scenario one calls for close-to-home rezoning division-wide, converting Heritage Elementary for alternative education; rebuilding Sandusky Elementary; closing Fort Hill Community School; renovating Linkhorne, Paul Munro, Perrymont and Robert S. Payne elementary schools; and other elementary building improvements.

Day said he’s opposed to that scenario because of a conversation he’d had with the former director of Fort Hill School who said she’d prefer to have two separate facilities than one large location — “so for that reason I think moving the alternative education facility into the Heritage facility is contrary to the best interests of the alternative education plan.”

Day also noted scenario one is expected to generate the least operational savings, coupled with the highest implementation cost.

“It also involved rebuilding Sandusky at a price tag of \$52 million. None of the other scenarios have that kind of a price tag associated with them and as Dr. Edwards explained a few minutes ago the way that we’re going to do this is we’re going to decide which facilities that the administration has to work with and then they will develop an appropriate plan for them.”

Board Chair Atul Gupta later said the vote will give Superintendent Crystal Edwards a clear directive to start developing an implementation strategy.

“I can assure you as one individual board member, there’ll be no rush for pushing it down the throat whichever decision we pick. We’ve got to take time and do it right,” Gupta said.

Much of the audience filed out of the board room immediately after the vote. Parents, many in tears, weren’t consoled by Edwards’ earlier comment that “people, people, people and connections and relationships that teachers have with children” — rather than just buildings — are what make schools special.

“I can’t speak for Sandusky, but I can tell you at T.C. Miller, it is the most incredible — not school — it’s a family. It is a family of parents and teachers and staff who treat your kids like family,” Karla Jones said. She’s the parent of two T.C. Miler students, and said her son had struggled at another LCS school.

“...[A]nd since coming to T.C. Miller, both of our kids that are there are thriving, they’re part of the theater program. And they [the board] keep saying, ‘we’re just going to pick that up and move it to Bass.’ You can’t just pick a school up and move it and expect everything to be the same. It doesn’t work that way. The only analogy I can come up with is OK, you take colors, you add colors together do the colors stay the same? No.”

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By Emma_Martin

ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

E.C. Glass safe room

School Board votes against accepting grant from LGBTQ-centered nonprofit

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Nov 19, 2023

The Lynchburg City School Board has voted not to accept a \$10,000 grant from an LGBTQ-focused nonprofit, a possible temperature gauge for the board's upcoming consideration of Gov. Glenn Youngkin's model policies on the treatment of transgender students.

At its meeting Tuesday, the board voted 7-2 against accepting the grant from the nonprofit It Gets Better Project, with board members Anthony Andrews and Sharon Carter the only votes in favor.

Students with the E.C. Glass High School Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) club applied for and were recently awarded a grant from the nonprofit to develop a safe-space or "quiet room" at the school, intended for all students' use; to purchase and stock free menstrual product dispensers for school bathrooms; and to expand club activities.

"Many schools within LCS already have such rooms and they have been shown to promote student self-regulation and are correlated to better student outcomes," E.C. Glass Principal Daniel Rule told the board at its Oct. 24 meeting.

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“The students selected this project due to the high rate of bullying that the LGBTQIA+ community experiences, but the entire school would be welcomed and encouraged to use the room. The budget for the room includes flexible seating, interactive sensory devices, non-intrusive lighting and white noise machines,” Rule said.

The stated mission of the nonprofit is to “communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them,” according to the organization’s website, **itgetsbetter.org**.

The “50 States 50 Grants 5,000 Voices” program is an “initiative to fund projects that support and uplift LGBTQ+ identity in schools across the U.S. and Canada.” One school in every American state has been selected in 2023 to receive a grant from the organization.

During public comments at the Nov. 14 meeting, five E.C. Glass students and GSA club members told the board why they applied for the grant and why they picked the projects it’s intended to fund.

“Many students, including myself, struggle with mental health. School can be overwhelming just by itself, but a lot has happened in the last three or four years, what with the uncertainty of COVID along with the many lockdowns and how those have affected students,” junior Lindley Crosby said.

“Students have skipped school because they don’t feel safe or they don’t feel supported and these classrooms can be disruptive and chaotic and sometimes it can be too much. We want to provide this safe room so they have somewhere to go and

breathe for a second.”

E.C. Glass senior and GSA co-president Brittany Harris told the board, “I put passion and energy into this project in hopes of bettering our school, not just physically but socially. I wanted there to be access to an area to express hard feelings and stress in a safe environment and for the ability of sanitary products to no longer be limited to one space.” Students said free sanitary products are currently only available in the nurse’s office, far from some classrooms.

One grandparent and guardian of an E.C. Glass student, Greg Barry, spoke in opposition to the grant.

“Let me be very clear, the LBGTQ agenda in schools is about indoctrination and grooming our children into an evil and wicked lifestyle, all while circumventing the rights and responsibilities of parents,” Barry said.

Board member Christian DePaul said he wouldn’t support the board’s receipt of the grant because of his concerns about the nonprofit, citing his research into the organization.

“My point is, and there’s other people on the board who have this opinion, I believe, that this is a group I don’t think should be associated with LCS,” he said.

“I cannot support that project with all the things that I’ve seen on their website, I cannot do it.”

Board member Farid Jalil has raised concerns about the nonprofit’s co-founder, activist and sex-advice columnist Dan Savage, who started the project in 2010 to prevent suicide among LGBTQ youth.

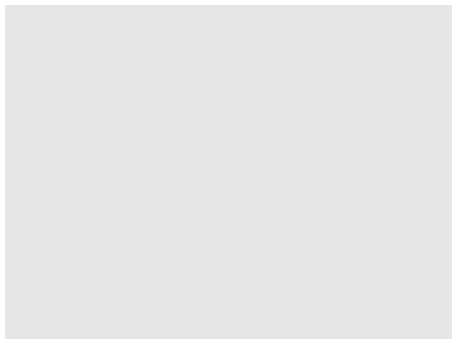
Board member Randall Trost said he’s concerned with “branding” and “theming” associated with the project and “strings attached” to grant receipt — the nonprofit requires some acknowledgment of its donorship and E.C. Glass staff suggested a sign saying “It Gets Better” outside the room.

Ultimately acknowledging the merit of the students' request, the board voted 6-3 in favor of a subsequent motion by Vice Chair Martin Day to direct LCS administration to find the funds within its budget to match the grant and create the safe room.

Board Chair Atul Gupta then offered to donate the money himself, saying he was moved by students' presentation — pending consultation with the board's attorney about whether his personal contribution would constitute a conflict of interest.

"The kids need it. Let's get it done and move on," Gupta said. Board members Letitia Lowery and DePaul said earlier in the meeting they'd also donate towards the students' asks.

Day then moved to reconsider his earlier motion directing LCS to find the funds, which the board voted unanimously in favor of. The board also voted to take up the topic again at its next meeting on Dec. 5 at 5 p.m. in the LCS Administration building at 915 Court St.



DePaul

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“Students have skipped school because they don’t feel safe or they don’t feel supported and these classrooms can be disruptive and chaotic and sometimes it can be too much. We want to provide this safe room so they have somewhere to go and breathe for a second.”

— **Lindley Crosby**, junior at E.C. Glass High School

By Emma_Martin

lynchburg city schools

Protest at school board meeting over LGBT-grant vote

Emma_Martin

Dec 7, 2023

Emma_Martin

In September, there was standing room only at a Lynchburg City School Board meeting when officials voted to close or convert two division elementary schools, parents and community members wearing yellow and blue to support the schools.

This was again the case at Tuesday night's meeting, but with people sporting all colors of the rainbow and holding rainbow flags and signs packing the board room, protesting the body's **recent vote** not to accept a student-acquired grant from a nonprofit whose mission is to prevent suicide among LGBTQ youth.

Students with the E.C. Glass High School Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) applied for and recently were awarded a \$10,000 grant from the It Gets Better Project to create a safe space or "quiet room" at the school, intended for all students' use; to purchase and stock free menstrual product dispensers for school bathrooms; and to expand club activities.

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All grants \$5,000 and greater are subject to school board approval, and after discussion over the course of two meetings, the board voted 7-2 on Nov. 14 against accepting the grant. Board members cited concerns about the organization's founder, sex-advice columnist and LGBTQ activist Dan Savage, about content on the nonprofit's website **itgetsbetter.org**, and about "theming" and "branding" associated with the safe room and with "strings attached" to the grant receipt.

Ultimately recognizing the merit of students' request, the board first voted for LCS administration to find the money within its budget to establish the safe room, then reversed that vote. Individual board members also offered to contribute the money themselves, pending legal counsel's assessment of whether their donation would constitute a conflict of interest.

Many of the same E.C. Glass students from the earlier meeting again spoke during public comments Tuesday, expressing disappointment and frustration at the board's decision.

"If you can't fund T.C. Miller, how will you fund our room and all the other rooms for all the other LCS schools that don't have one? What money is there in the budget for us?" GSA Vice President Percy Phillips asked the board.

"I thank you for the thought of donating us money, I appreciate it dearly, but we wouldn't have had this problem if you had just given us the grant. Sorry if that seemed rude, I'm just fed up of always being put last."

Parents and community members expressed concerns about the message rejecting the grant might send, and urged the board to reconsider.

"They [the It Gets Better Project] discourage suicide and promise that life will get better," E.C. Glass graduate and University of Lynchburg student Maggie Kicklighter said.

“When the board rejected this grant, you rejected these values, citing suicide prevention and the empowerment of LGBTQ+ youth as controversial and immoral.”

Similarly, community member Kellen Knight said, “Let me be clear, queer people are not a partisan issue up for debate.”

In the national spotlight

Interviewed before the meeting, School Board Chair Atul Gupta and Vice Chair Martin Day addressed the backlash from the decision, which they said stemmed from a recent Washington Post editorial.

Day said LCS staff received an email directed at the board wishing death on board members, which he directed to Lynchburg Police. Gupta said the board clerk has also received a threatening voicemail intended for the board.

“The Lynchburg Police Department is aware of alleged threats against the Lynchburg City School Board. A police report has been filed and we will continue to work with LCS on this investigation,” LPD said in response to an email inquiry.

“You know, it’s one thing to make a reasoned argument, ‘here’s why we disagree with you,’ I think we all welcome that, but when it crosses the line to ‘you’re horrible because you made this decision,’ nobody’s trying to be horrible, we’re all trying to do the right thing,” Day said.

Gupta said, “the point is, this is an issue the board truly cares about. We do want these kids to have a calming room, there’s no two ways about that.”

Alternative funding sources

Later in the meeting, LCS Superintendent Crystal Edwards said administration is working to address the need for more free menstrual products in schools. She also expressed gratitude to the GSA: “as a person who writes grants, I know how difficult that is.”

Edwards said the **Lynchburg Educational Foundation** has offered to be a “flow-through agent” for anyone looking to contribute to establishing the safe room at E.C. Glass.

Day said he’s submitted a request to Lynchburg Commonwealth’s Attorney Bethany Harrison for an advisory opinion on whether a board member can make a financial contribution to the project.

“... [T]hen we will just wait until we get an opinion on that and that will clarify for us whether it’s legally appropriate or acceptable for individual board members to make contributions to the school district specifically on this issue,” Day said.

Grant process questioned

Coincidentally, the board had another recent grant receipt to approve on its agenda Tuesday night, \$5,000 from Dick’s Sporting Goods awarded to Paul Laurence Dunbar Middle School for Innovation, for the purchase of athletic equipment specifically to support the school’s volleyball program.

Speakers at Tuesday’s and previous meetings asked the board if it intended to examine all grants the school system receives with the same scrutiny. Agreeing about a need for fairness on its dealings with different grants, the board talked about the Dick’s Sporting Goods grant at length and ultimately voted not to accept it during the meeting, board member Sharon Carter the only vote in favor. The board instead reached a consensus to formulate a system of questions to ask about every granting agency, and intends to reconsider the Dick’s Sporting Goods grant after doing so.

“...[W]e’ve always had a backbone, but we’re just showing it a little bit more with some of the things that we’re doing tonight,” DePaul said during his board comment time.

“I looked at the way in which we might be providing a disservice to these young people as they’re coming up, by having them think that if you just whine and cry enough, it’s going to make a difference. We need to be an example of how standing up

to those negative things that happen in this world — that’s what we need to do, that’s what we’re doing here, and that’s going to be a lot better than just saying, ‘it’s OK, yeah, you’re a victim.’ We need to make people stronger, that is our job for our community, our state, our country.”

The next regular school board meeting is scheduled for Jan. 9 at 5 p.m. in the LCS Administration building at 915 Court St. A public hearing on the budget and school board work session is scheduled for Dec. 12 at the same time and location.

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