

Brown School Educational Reuse Sub-Committee Report May 2015

Sub-Committee

Bruce Menin, Chair
Pam Brockmeier Armstrong
Melissa Cody
Moirra Connell
Nancy Earls
Allison Fruh
David Hochheiser
Audrey McCarthy
Laurie Naughton
Valerie Natoli Paquette
Dr. Ralph Orlando
Karen Sakaniwa
Amy Sullivan
Paulette Turco
Ken Woods

Brown School Educational Reuse Sub-Committee Report May 2015

Mission Statement

The mission of the Brown School Due Diligence Sub-Committee is to explore current and potential needs of the Newburyport School District, as well as to explore possible innovative educational uses of the Brown School to determine whether the district has any further fiscally credible use for the Brown School as an educational facility. A report, with recommendations from the Sub-Committee, will be issued publicly and delivered to the Newburyport School Committee prior to the School Committee vote on whether or not to decommission the building as an educational facility. Under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter. 40, section 3, the School Committee has an obligation to make a determination as to whether the building is surplus.

In considering the disposition of the Brown School, a Re-use Committee comprised of individuals representing a broad cross-section of the community was convened. Parents, administrative staff from the school district, advocates, SPED-Pac members, School Committee members, and others were invited to participate. The group met five times, reviewing research and data generated by teams from within the larger group and engaging in a wide-ranging and animated dialogue about the Brown School. The Committee considered whether there was an immediate need for continued use of the building as an educational facility and whether there were also potential long-term uses.

Executive Summary

The Brown School Educational Reuse Committee, having gathered information through research and extensive interviews with administrators, faculty, staff of the Newburyport public schools, as well as parents and members of the community, strongly recommends that the Newburyport School Committee exercise its option under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40, section 3, paragraphs 2 and 3, and retain the Brown School to address immediate and potential educational needs and uses. We recommend that the District consider transitional, non-educational uses of the space (including those that have uses compatible with education) to offset operating costs during the period of time when the district is “ramping up” a more robust educational use of the site. The community members of this Committee arrived at this determination unanimously.

Introduction

It became clear to the Brown School Educational Re-use Study Committee early in our discussions that the ‘problem’ of what to do with the Brown School is actually a rare and genuine opportunity for the Newburyport School Committee to create something needed, new and innovative; something that can reach beyond the walls of the existing building and weave itself into our community. The School Committee has a mandate to dream big and plan well for the schools. Too often, the short-term challenge of upgrading and maintaining a school building taken out of use has resulted in the loss of that asset to the school system. To date, the city has not kept a single one of what were once dozens of schools; neither has it used those assets to generate additional funds for the remaining schools. As a result, many opportunities for enrichment and enhancement of our school district have been lost. Keeping the Brown School under the aegis of the school district would be a step in the right direction; an intentional reversal of that practice.

In recent history, our school system has endured many budgetary cuts and programmatic losses. At the time these cuts were made, they were necessary to address short-term budget realities. In retrospect they have been losses from which recovery has been slow and difficult; and in some cases like World Language at the Middle School, and a business curriculum at the High School, have never been replaced. To that end, this committee urges the School Committee to consider what may be gained in the long-term from keeping the Brown School within the school district.

Summary of the Options

The committee determined, after research and discussion, that the decision of whether or not to immediately decommission the school must consider four options for the future of the school property.

These four options were:

- 1) The property could be sold with the determination that no future educational use can be determined at this time for this space.
- 2) The property could be re-adapted, upgraded and maintained and developers sought as no short-term use of the space can be determined, but it is anticipated that within the next 20-99 years, the building may be determined appropriate to serve educational needs in Newburyport, and when such needs are determined, the space will be re-adapted again for educational use. Since adaptation will be performed twice, once to adapt from educational use and again to readapt for educational use, the cost of such adaptations should be carefully considered.
- 3) The property could continue to be used to meet identified school system educational, supportive and administrative needs and to develop and pilot new educational enrichment programs, some of which may be revenue producing, to maintain Newburyport's ranking and educational leadership among comparative school systems.
- 4) The property could remain as an asset for meeting *current and potential* educational needs, with all or a portion of the space be rented to entities- some furthering the educational uses of the building- as limited by Massachusetts statute and approved by the School Committee and the Commissioner of Education, in the knowledge that educational uses of the space can be projected within 10 years.

This ten-year period for determining projected use may be extended/renewed for an additional ten years in accordance with statutory provisions regarding "surplus" school property under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40, section 3, paragraphs 2 and 3:

“Notwithstanding the provisions of this section, a city or town, with the approval of the school committee, may rent or lease any school building not in actual use and, with the approval of the commissioner of education, surplus space in a school building in actual use to any one or more public or private profit-making businesses or nonprofit organizations; provided, however, that joint occupancy of a school building in actual use as such shall not interfere with educational programs being conducted in said building. The terms of any such rental or lease shall be as approved by the school committee; provided, however, that no school building not in actual use shall be rented or leased for an initial term longer than ten years, but with renewal options if approved by the school committee.

The monies received from such rental or lease shall be kept separate and apart from other city or town funds in the city or town treasury and may be expended by the school committee without further appropriation for the upkeep of the facility so rented or surplus space which is so rented; provided, however, that any balance remaining in such account at the close of a fiscal year shall be paid into the General Fund of such city or town; and, provided further, that in any city or town that accepts this proviso, any such balance shall remain in said account and may be expended for the upkeep and maintenance of any facility under the control of the school committee.”

Choices 1 or 2 would require a decision to decommission the school.

Choices 3 and/or 4 would not require a vote decommissioning the school.

Choice 4

The Ad Hoc Committee on Brown School Reuse unanimously recommends that the Newburyport School Committee implement Choice 4, which would not require a vote by the School Committee to decommission the Brown School. The balance of this report explores a myriad of potential educational uses for the site based on interviews with administrative staff, conversations with interested parties across the city, and research regarding student demographics and projections as well as potential uses for the site that align with the goal of ongoing educational utility to the district. We believe there are sufficient existing and potential educational programs to fully occupy the building within ten years; and that until that time, there are adjunctive uses for the building that will enhance and support the mission of the Newburyport Public Schools.

We believe Option 1 does not reflect what our research and data indicate to us.

We believe Option 2, while closer to the mark, would not provide a potential developer with the security they would want for making a significant investment.

We believe that Option 3 would be difficult to implement because there are not immediately ready the kinds of educational programs envisioned by the district to fill the school at this time.

Based on interviews with school administrators, discussions with community interests, our own ongoing dialogue, and a cursory data analysis, we have determined that the Brown School can be used to address immediate needs as well as potential needs of the district, and we encourage the School Committee not to vote to decommission it. These uses range from those that are based on current need with real revenue possibilities, to uses that reach beyond traditional ideas and envision an aspirational educational experience for the Newburyport community. We believe it would be short-sighted and more expensive in the long-run to release the Brown School when we currently have space and programmatic needs that can be met within this building.

Strategic Planning and Potential Expansion of Housing Stock

The School Administration and School Committee will be embarking on a strategic planning process before the year is out. Decommissioning the Brown School before that process has taken place is premature and potentially self-defeating. Our school population appears to have stabilized at a level at which nearly all class size guidelines are stretched to their fullest. There is no longer any space

available to serve additional students through the Choice program, which has traditionally been a significant source of revenue for the district. Choice revenues are down close to 50% from what they were at their peak ten years ago; nearly \$750,000 per year.

Additionally, the city is currently exploring a major expansion of housing stock, both affordable and market rate. The number of units being considered ranges from 80 to 500, and will potentially have a significant impact on the possible number of students the district will need to serve.

There are additional factors leading the Sub-Committee to advise against quickly decommissioning the Brown School. The Brown School, because it has not been decommissioned, can be re-opened without coming into full compliance with contemporary building codes. At the very least, maintaining the building offers an insurance policy over the next several years for potential significant adjustments in student population. Taken as the broadest of opportunities, retaining the Brown School gives the Newburyport public schools the space to dream and create enriching programs for existing students.

Having come to a unanimous consensus that the building remains a viable and worthwhile asset to the schools, we suggest a range of potential opportunities for educational reuse of the building. By no means is our list complete; though it does envision full and/or partial use of the building for direct educational purposes. It also allows for additional use of the site for what we consider to be “educational-compatible” uses - those uses of the building by individuals or organizations that would be able to engage with academic programs in ways that enrich and enhance the curriculum.

This report offers what we believe is the beginning of an expansive vision for the use of the Brown School site to meet present needs and enable the creation of programs to support 21st century learning and skills. It is the beginning of the public conversation regarding how we best use existing and potential resources fully and creatively.

The format that follows lists possible uses for the Brown School clearly and succinctly. To the extent that we can provide details we have done so; we did not take our task to be the full vetting of all ideas, and the creation of a management and funding plan to address plans. We recognize that ‘dreaming big and planning well’ must be rooted in what is fiscally possible. But we must also seize opportunities when they are presented to us; continued educational use of the Brown School is one of those opportunities,

We have done our best to identify or project some potential revenue generating options in our research and to include that information where available. We have reviewed the existing infrastructure needs at the Brown School and the feasibility work to move the building into full compliance with current Building and ADA codes. The work is substantial, although to date both the Planning Department and the Mayor’s office recognize that the initial cost estimate was significantly higher than the actual work will cost. We recommend that the expenses and potential sources of revenue attendant on each of these recommendations be researched, as part of an overall management plan for the building, and more accurate numbers and tasks identified.

A Brief Survey of Potential Options for the Brown School Compatible with Educational Use

Immediate options:

1. Newburyport Youth Services

NYS serves hundreds of children year-round, through a variety of site-based and off-site programs. Currently housed at the Brown School, it could continue to be located on the first floor.

- We believe that any of the suggested educational uses of the building are compatible with the continued presence of the Newburyport Youth Services programs on that site.
 1. Costs/Revenue: revenue-neutral for the school district (There is now a Youth Services Brown School line item in the city budget, currently funded through transfers from within the City budget)
 2. Building impact: No upgrades required to the building for this use. Would need to formalize a lease for exact space usage in the site.
 3. Neighborhood impact: Very similar to this building's previous use as a school in that the neighborhood is already welcoming to children.

2. SPED Post-Grad Program

The post-graduate SPED program is currently housed at the High School where the equipment and space do not match the needs and intent of the program. The students in this program would benefit greatly from access to a dedicated kitchen and would benefit from spaces that function as a model bedroom and living room for ADL (activities of daily living) support to prepare them to live independently. These kinds of spaces are possible at the Brown School. Additionally, if housed in the Brown School, the SPED Post-Grad program would potentially benefit from collaboration with NYS as well as the greater community. With easy access to downtown, students would make better use of the public library, YWCA, Maritime Museum, and all the parks and outdoor recreational opportunities that the downtown offers. Location would also allow the program to collaborate with local businesses. These post-graduate students would also benefit from using the Brown School kitchen.

Next year, this program will house 5 students. A SPED representative for the District has met several times with other contiguous and nearby public school districts (Triton, Pentucket, Georgetown, Ipswich and Amesbury), which also lack a comprehensive space for their post grad program. None of these other communities have the potential to develop an alternative space for the program so it better meets student's needs. The post grad program at Brown would be a one of a kind program in this area, and would attract choice students.

We believe that these post-graduate students would best be served by the development of a regional Post-Grad program on the site of the Brown School. The facilities needed would be easily compatible with other uses of the space, and a regionalized program has the potential to produce additional revenue for the site. We encourage the Superintendent to appoint a study group as soon as possible to pursue this option, and to explore other locations for relocations of this program if the Brown School is not chosen to house the post-grad program. The current space is not compatible with student needs.

3. Relocation of the District Administrative Offices

The renovation of the Nock/Molin School enabled the school to come into compliance with state and federal regulations regarding the adequacy of space for special needs students. Without expanding the

footprint of the school, some additional space was carved out to create additional classroom space. There still exists a shortage of classroom space at the Nock that hinders the reintroduction of a robust World Languages program, and other possible Explore classes. Space does not exist for the development of a dedicated robotics lab, or other STEM opportunities for Nock and Molin students. Although originally discussed as part of the renovations, the recapturing of current District Offices and creating additional classroom space was not included in the original RFR submitted, and re-emerged as a change order that did not include any state offset funding, and was rejected by the School Building Committee as too expensive.

There are some compelling reasons for continuing to house the District Administration in an operating school building. There are compelling reasons for finding classroom space to be able to restore and re-energize the kind of offerings to our students that not only once existed in our district but better prepare them as 21st Century students.

We believe the idea of moving the District Offices to the Brown School has great merit, and encourage the District to appoint a working group to thoroughly explore the idea. Having missed an opportunity to garner some state funding to support that effort does not mitigate the value of creating additional classroom space for students at the Nock-Molin, and deserves a thorough and public discussion.

4. Conference Room/ School Committee Meeting Room

The District has no dedicated Conference Room or training space; the School Committee does not have a dedicated space to meet that would allow for the permanent installation of Portmedia video equipment. Space could easily be found in the former library at the Brown School to serve these functions.

5. Storage for performing arts programs at the High School and Nock Molin

There is a critical need for storage space for the performing arts program at both of these schools. Currently props are being housed in non-climate controlled spaces, and outdoors, where they are subject to the predations of the weather. Costumes stored at the high school will lose their space next year when the Business Program initiates a School Store, which will be housed in that room that currently holds costumes. Money invested, countless volunteer hours are being lost by this inefficiency; art work is being destroyed due to lack of storage space for the program in both these schools.

Longer Term Educational Options:

6. Adult Ed

The potential exists to utilize existing classroom space at the Brown School to centralize Adult Education offerings during the day; use of the site to run programs in the evening would free up High School space in the evening to run dual enrollment and other college programs on the High School site. Brown School could also be used to as the site for dual enrollment classes with NECCO in English and Social Studies. Currently, students participating in this program need to travel to NECCO, which makes the opportunity impossible for many students to access. The High School does not have space to house this program due to teachers needing their classrooms for prep and after school help, and the Newburyport Adult Education program using the high school space at night. This could be a unique and collaborative program with Pentucket, Triton, Central Catholic, Methuen, and Whittier High Schools.

7. Relocation of the Elementary After-School program to the Brown School

The current After-School program houses approximately 100 students and is housed at the Bresnahan School. The program is a very important part of the after school landscape for Newburyport families. Staff arrives at 2pm to begin preparing for the program, and the program uses both the gym and the cafeteria simultaneously. Because the Bresnahan does not have an auditorium, these are the only 2 spaces large enough for a full staff meeting to occur at Bresnahan. With advance notice the program will vacate one of those areas for the afternoon. Professional development could be utilized more fully with access to both of these spaces.

8. After School Learning

A full range of ongoing focused After School Learning options could be developed and sited at the Brown School. These include World Language, theater arts, tutoring services, science /STEAM Center. Space simply does not exist to establish centers like this at any of the existing schools. New models could be explored, such as Mentor Centers encouraging multi-age engagement among all students.

9. Summer Remedial and Enrichment School

The Newburyport School District currently offers no summer remedial or enrichment programs for non-special education eligible students. One of the reasons for this is that space has been minimally available in the schools during the summer-a time when ongoing maintenance of the building- repairs, painting, etc., takes place. Using the Brown School as a site for summer remedial and enrichment classes for students would open up space that has not been useful for programs that have the potential to be extraordinarily useful for students as well a potentially revenue-generating opportunities. The Brown makes a terrific site for our burgeoning partnerships with colleges and universities.

10. Visual Arts Academy

Visual Arts programs in the Newburyport School district have run the gamut from dedicated Art classrooms to 'art on a cart.' Cuts over the past ten years to visual arts have been impactful. We have often discussed, but never implemented a sustainable partnership with the arts community of Newburyport.

Access to the Brown School offers us an opportunity to create a Visual Arts Academy, where students, faculty and members of the artistic community of Newburyport can work together to learn from one another. A classroom could become a dedicated gallery space for art produced in the schools. This is particularly compelling if, as is being considered, Artist Studios are developed as part of the proposed building use.

*** 14 Cedar Street, Amesbury as a Model ***

The possibility of generating revenue through the creation of a floor of artist's lofts is real and has precedence in the community. Utilizing the numbers generated by an existing artistic space at 14 Cedar Street in Amesbury, we can begin to sketch out potential revenues. Space at 14 Cedar that is 150-300 square foot is \$20-25 square foot/year and increases at a rate of 3%/year. At the \$25/square foot rate, 300 square feet gives annual income of \$7,500/year (\$625/month), and 150 square foot gives revenue of \$3,750/year (\$312/month). Percent of hallway space as a gallery is also used in the determination of the rental space assessment.

If all spaces are within that size, then rental of 10,000 square foot would, at 14 Cedar Street rates, provide \$250,000 revenue annually. Double that space would provide \$500,000 the first year and an increase of 3% each year. A more pleasing, upscale indoor and outdoor space would bring in higher revenues. The artist lofts in Lowell command twice the fee as 14 Cedar, but the area is more developed.

\$30/ square foot /year for 10,000 square foot would bring in revenues of \$300,000 in annual revenues. Double the space to 20,000 square foot and revenues could increase to \$600,000, based on 100% occupancy.

14 Cedar rental fees include utilities, whereas the Lowell Artist studios do not and are double those of 14 Cedar, but have developed landscaping and upscale interior space. This kind application of available space at the Brown can help fund essential infrastructure work that is needed on the building and perhaps even some of the educational programs proposed for the space. With visual artists already in the building, part of the agreement for tenancy might include offering mentoring or some sort of educational experience for students.

The Brown School could serve as incubator and pilot space for potential school and school/community programs as they develop.

11. Bresnahan “Home Room”

The proximity of the Brown School to downtown, and to an historic district of the city, and to diverse and unique environmental spaces like the Joppa Flats, the Audubon Sanctuary and the Parker River Wildlife Sanctuary Headquarters offered incredible value as adjunctive learning spaces for Newburyport students, for generations. By keeping one or two classrooms as functioning classrooms, the Bresnahan teachers could schedule use of those rooms to serve as “home base” for local field trips with their students throughout the school year.

12. Brown School Park

The area behind the Brown School has been designated as a park by the City Council; historically, it has always served as a park, playground and recreation area for South End children. As the usage of the building is resolved, the park will benefit from investment by the city as well as the community. It will continue to provide a safe recreational area for city youth, and has potential as well to augment the educational services that may be offered in the building.

Conclusion

These suggestions are not a comprehensive list of educational options for the Brown School going forward. For the most part, they reflect suggestions offered to the Committee by district administrators and members of the community. They barely scratch the surface of what is possible.

Should the School Committee decide that the building should remain with the District for the foreseeable future, the Brown Re-Use Committee strongly recommends that the School Committee appoint a task force to begin to map out a strategy for utilization of the building over time.

Within the Newburyport school community, there is a need for long term strategic planning so that we are not simply scrambling year-to-year to keep our district afloat. Such an effort is about to get underway. It is the considered and unanimous opinion of the Brown Re-Use Committee that use of the school for ongoing educational experiences for district students be part of that planning.

We want to aspire to be not just a good school system; we want an excellent school system. We can do this by optimizing the resources we already have to embrace and encourage what is unique and exceptional about Newburyport. Buildings like the Brown School not only embody our history and uniqueness as a community but, this committee determined, can continue to house educational programs and people, and reflect the beginning of this process. |

The Brown School Educational Re-use Committee strongly recommends that the Superintendent put together a working group that includes members of the greater community, to map out a strategy of assuring that the Brown School continues to provide educational value to our students and community.