

# North Kitsap Options parents upset about program's upcoming move

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North Kitsap School District (Photo: North Kitsap School District)

NORTH KITSAP — Parents of students in North Kitsap School District's Options Program are speaking out against the administration's plan to move the program this fall from Richard Gordon Elementary to David Wolffe Elementary.

Demographics are driving the move, district officials say. Parents are worried about the impact on the program and upset they weren't consulted before the decision was announced to families in late January.

"I think what was really hard was the way it was announced," said parent Mark Miller, representing the North Kitsap Options Parents Group. "Right now we have a lot of people who don't know what's going to happen."

The multi-age, flexible learning program serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade, allowing each student to progress at his or her own pace. A strong sense of community among students and a high level of parent involvement are hallmarks of the program, according to district officials and parents.

Options has existed at North Kitsap for 30 years and is one of three "signature" programs, along with Robotics and Dual Language Immersion. Options' current enrollment is 94, and there is a waiting list. The district's total enrollment is around 6,000 students.

Superintendent Laurynn Evans said administrators have had Options on their radar since she arrived in 2017, as some schools including Gordon approached capacity while others, notably Wolffe, were under capacity. A demographic study in 2018 projected continued growth at Gordon, now with about 500 students, while Wolffe, with about 350 students, is expected to remain steady.

Both schools are roughly the same size and receive about the same staffing resources under state apportionment formulas. Options students share Gordon's lunchroom, library, art and music classrooms and other common areas. It's getting to be a tight fit, Evans said.

"When we looked at it, we realized we had a very difficult decision," Evans said, adding the administrative team was between a "rock and a hard place."

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Evans said the team over a number of months considered three possible solutions to Gordon's overcrowding. The first was dissolving the Options

Program. "That was off the table," Evans said.

The second was adjusting boundaries. But that would have meant moving non-Options kids from Gordon — including low-income students, high-need students and English language learners — to accommodate Options families. Two-thirds of Options students don't live in Gordon's service area.

That left the solution of moving Options to Woffle, a choice Evans knew was likely to create a backlash. Parents learned of the administrative decision to move Options on Jan. 21 when Evans broke the news at one of the parent group's meetings and then followed up with a letter.

Miller and other parents question their lack of opportunity to weigh in, given part of the district's strategic plan is to engage stakeholders. Another pillar of the plan is "transparency," something Miller says wasn't shown in the decision-making process. Parents are reminded of the ill will generated by the decision to close Breidablik Elementary in 2013 because of falling enrollment.

"We have a really significant amount of people who are distrustful of the administration," Miller said.

Evans defended the process, saying that the alternatives were limited and that the district needed to consider the fate of the Options program within the context of equity for all students. It wasn't a decision open to community brainstorming and debate, she said, adding that administrators didn't take the decision lightly.

"What I didn't want to do was engage parents in a disingenuous process where we already knew what we needed to do," Evans said.

The district is looking at running a bond in 2022 as its capital levy will expire. Woffle and Hilder Pearson Elementary are next up for a major renovation. Evans said properly accommodating the Options program at Woffle will be part of the upgrade.

Since the announcement, dozens of Options parents have shown up at school board meetings to express their displeasure. Two prevailing themes have been traffic safety and opportunities for middle-schoolers to take classes and activities at Kingston Middle School.

Evans said the district has looked at ingress and egress at both schools and found the turnaround times for each to be similar. Miller argues that adding students at Woffle will create backups and slowdowns.

Evans acknowledges parents' concerns about access to Woffle via Highland Road, which intersects with Highway 104. She said district officials plan to lobby county commissioners for improvements on Highland Road and state transportation officials for improvements at the Highway 104 intersection.

Some middle-school students now leave Options early to access math classes, sports and activities at Kingston Middle School or the high school near Gordon. Evans said the district could certify Options teachers in higher math instruction or students could access a hybrid online-plus-virtual-instruction software program already in use by some high school students. As for leaving Options early to access sports and activities, Evans said that calls for a broader discussion of district and parents' priorities.

"We can't have kids missing 90 minutes of instruction," Evans said. "I've told (the parents) if they want that to be the tail that's going to wag the dog, that's going to affect the program in different ways."

Evans has been meeting regularly with a small group of parents representing the Options families. That group will have an opportunity to tour Woffle soon, she said, and the intention is to allow other parents and students to tour the school in the near future.

Evans acknowledged the change will impact families. The purpose of the meetings is to "ensure we make this transition good for kids."

Miller said the parents' group wants to ensure that all the ramifications and alternatives have been explored, and they're asking the district to delay the change.

Options teachers have toured Woffle and told the administration what their needs are, most of which the district can provide, Evans said.

The principals of Gordon and Woffle are on board, according to Evans. Woffle's principal is welcoming the program eagerly, Gordon's is sad to see it go.

"It's tough," Evans said. "There's no easy answer to this."

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