

Your Voice: Jeffco Public Schools plan A or plan B: Framing the issue

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The Jeffco Board of Education is currently considering two alternatives for completing the school restructurings that were triggered by the decision to convert Jefferson High School into a Grade 7 – 12 school, as part of a larger plan to substantially improve its academic achievement results.

The plan put forward by the District would move Stevens elementary school into the current Wheat Ridge 5-8 building (and significantly expand its enrollment), and would move Sobesky Academy from its current location on Hoyt Street in Lakewood into the current Stevens facility. As described on the District's website, Sobesky is "is designed to meet the intensive emotional, behavioral, and related academic needs of students with identified emotional disabilities...A student's stay at Sobesky Academy will generally be a short-term effort to develop a set of skills that will allow the student to be successful in their return to their home school."

The plan put forth by the Wheat Ridge Committee for Educational Excellence (a group of local business and municipal leaders) would leave Stevens and Sobesky in their current locations, move the current Everitt Middle School into the Wheat Ridge 5-8 facility, move the current Manning Grades 7 and 8 Option School into the Everitt facility, and allow the expansion of Maple Grove Elementary School into the current Manning facility, which is right next door.

From my perspective, what has been missing so far in this debate is a clear framing of the issues and clarification of the decision priorities that underlie the views of the many groups that are involved in this debate. To simplify the latter point, I think it would be helpful if the varying groups involved on either side of this issue were more clear about the result they are trying to optimize (i.e., their primary goal), and the constraints, if any, that they would like to impose on the Board's decision.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. As a member of the District Accountability Committee, and as the Chair of the School Accountability Committee at Wheat Ridge High School, my primary goal is to substantially improve student academic achievement results.

From my perspective, it is therefore helpful to start the evaluation of the two Jefferson Plan proposals by taking a look at the current achievement results at the schools involved in the "Plan A" versus "Plan B" choice facing the Board.

I'll start with Stevens Elementary School, and compare it to other nearby elementary schools that also have Pre-K programs.

The metric I'll use is the same one I used in a previous article (["What Are the Best Schools In Jeffco?"](#)): The average Median Growth Percentile (MGP) for 2012 to 2014 for math, reading, and writing for different groups of students. MGP is a metric that focuses on school value added, and not on the socio-economic background of a school's students (as would be the case if I used the percent of students who are proficient or advanced in different subjects, since that metric reflects both school value added **and** student demographics). The three-year average reduces the noise in MGP caused by turnover of students and teachers, and thus helps to focus on the school's underlying effectiveness as a system.

Since Stevens and nearby elementary schools with Pre-K programs all have significant numbers of at-risk students, the following table shows the average MGP results (and rank within Jeffco) for students who are eligible for free and reduced meals, but who are not English Language Learners, and who don't have either Individualized Education Plans or Advanced Learning Plans.

As you can see, Stevens' current academic achievement results significantly lag behind those of surrounding elementary schools with high numbers of at-risk students and Pre-K programs. As I understand it, a key issue with respect to the "Plan B" proposal is that it would require Stevens to stop its Pre-K program in order to accommodate fifth and sixth grade students. This would not be an issue under "Plan A", which would see Stevens moving to the current Wheat Ridge 5-8 facility and substantially increasing the number of students it serves.

FRL Not ALP Not ELL Not IEP	Math	Reading	Writing
Edgewater	62 (6)	60 (5)	62 (3)
Stevens	29 (66)	40 (67)	26 (67)
Lumberg	42 (60)	44 (61)	44 (48)
Pennington	37 (64)	42 (65)	42 (59)
Vivian	48 (46)	50 (39)	44 (51)
Slater	51 (34)	53 (24)	51 (24)

Let's now move on to a comparison of Everitt and Manning's achievement results.

In terms of size, these two schools are quite similar, with (based on the 2014 TCAP demographics) Everitt having 423 students, and Manning 447. However, while they are just 2.6 miles from each other, they have very different demographics:

The next table compares their recent achievement results:

	FRL, Not ALP or IEP	Not FRL, ALP, or IEP	ALP	IEP
Everitt	53%	29%	6%	12%
Manning	6%	56%	38%	0%

As you can see, compared to Everitt, Manning produces significantly better achievement results for its at-risk students, though it has far fewer of them. However, even where their demographics are more similar (students who are not FRL, ALP, or IEP), Manning also achieves significantly better results than Everitt.

FRL Not ALP Not ELL Not IEP	Math	Reading	Writing
Everitt	43 (24)	40 (23)	42 (17)
Manning	76 (1)	58 (1)	59 (1)
Not FRL Not ALP Not ELL Not IEP			
Everitt	44 (31)	49 (19)	45 (26)
Manning	69 (2)	57 (4)	61 (3)
ALP, not ELL, not IEP			
Everitt	Insufficient number to publicly report		
Manning	65 (4)	61 (3)	55 (9)

However, unlike Manning, which is at capacity in its current facility, Everitt currently operates well below its design capacity of 811 students. Moving Manning to Everitt would therefore potentially enable more Jeffco students to attend a middle school with a high level of school value added. Were this to happen, there would also be a secondary effect, in that, by taking over the Manning facility, Maple Grove (which is also a high performing school) would gain significant additional capacity to enable more students from its current waiting list to choice-in, and/or more capacity to meet the needs of a growing local student population if, as has been rumored, the Applewood Golf Club is developed into a substantial number of new homes.

A closely related question that has come up is the extent to which the school value added performance levels at Maple Grove and Manning are related to those schools' current size and/or demographic mix of students. With respect to the size issue, Oberon has significantly more (570) students than Manning, but still delivers a high level of value added (as measured by MGPs). Conversely, Everitt has fewer students than Manning, but lower MGPs among comparable student groups. So the size argument doesn't appear to be supported by the evidence.

With respect to the demographic mix issue, I can point to nearby Wheat Ridge High School, which has over fifty percent at risk-students, and whose MGPs still rank among the best schools in Jeffco for students eligible for free and reduced meals, students not eligible for them, **and** for students with Advanced

Learning Plans. So again, it does not appear that the diversity argument is supported by the evidence.

I should also note some additional considerations that I have heard people raise in the course of the debate over these two options.

That Jeffco has a growing need for the services provided by Sobesky Academy is in no doubt. However, Sobesky is just one part of a much larger issue that is confronting Jeffco, Denver, and many other school districts, all of which are facing a rising number of student mental health issues, and a higher percentage of serious cases. The effectiveness and efficiency of the system for managing these issues goes well beyond temporary placement in Sobesky, and includes the level, coordination, and utilization of in-school, articulation area, and district level resources, as well as coordination with outside providers like Jefferson County Mental Health, and other third parties. In my judgment, a full review of this system is long overdue. I have also heard more than one person ask whether, given the large physical area covered by the Jefferson County School District, it makes more sense to have a centrally located short-term placement organization like Sobesky, or a greater number of smaller facilities that are geographically dispersed around the county (and therefore more convenient for students and their families).

If one believes that the centralized approach makes the most sense, the estimate I have seen is that the move from Hoyt Street to Stevens will increase Sobesky's capacity by somewhere between 40 to 60 students, from its current level of 193 students. I have also seen the claim that these slots would immediately be filled with students who are now placed out of district, which is paid for by Jeffco schools at a cost per student that has been estimated at \$60,000 to \$80,000 per year (some of which would presumably be offset by higher staffing costs at an expanded Sobesky). What I haven't seen is any public analysis of where these out of district placements are located – e.g., placement in Littleton, Douglas County, or Cherry Creek might be geographically preferable to families located in South Jeffco, in the same way that placement in Boulder Valley might be preferable for families in the northern part of the county. In sum, it would be very helpful to the Board and community's consideration of the Sobesky issue if everyone could see it analyzed in the larger context to which it belongs.

Another concern that has been raised is the cost involved in the respective plans that have been proposed, including \$800,000 to convert Wheat Ridge 5-8 for elementary school use (and to move Stevens into this building), and \$300,000 for renovations at Stevens to support the Sobesky program. Thus far, I have not seen any cost estimates for moving Manning to Everitt, moving Everitt to Wheat Ridge 5-8, and re-converting Manning for use as an elementary school (which it originally was before the new Maple Grove was built). It is hard to make a good decision if you don't have a clear view of both options' economics.

As I said at the outset, different groups of people on either side of the Jefferson "Plan A" and "Plan B" debate seem to be pursuing different primary goals (e.g., moving Sobesky to a larger facility; keeping Manning where it is; expanding Stevens; increasing achievement; minimizing cost, etc.), and consciously or unconsciously imposing different constraints on acceptable solutions to the decision problem at hand. If the Board is to make an optimal decision whose logic will be clearly understood by the community, then it is important that all the groups involved in this debate are as transparent as possible about their underlying goals and the price they are willing to pay — or have other groups pay — in order to achieve them.

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