

**DISTRICT OFFICES**

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MEMORANDUM

To: Burlington Board of School Commissioners
From: Tom Flanagan, Superintendent
CC: Nathan Lavery, Executive Director of Finance and Operations; Noel Green, Principal, BHS
Date: October 20, 2020
Subject: BHS Options for 10/20/20 Board Meeting

This memo articulates options for a location for Burlington High School (BHS) for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years and provides context that will inform future conversations and decision-making.

In September 2020, the district learned that the BHS/BTC Campus had Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) in the air that are above the Vermont Department of Health (VTDOH) screening value of 15 ng/m³. The district reviewed these results with the VTDOH and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and both the VTDOH and the EPA recommended that students not return to the building until further testing and remediation was conducted. Since many spaces in buildings A-E are above the VTDOH screening value of 15 ng/m³, the VTDOH recommended that we conduct further testing and remediation to better understand the extent of airborne PCB's and the strategy to reduce the presence of PCB's in the air. The EPA explained that their screening level of 500-600 ng/m³ is not a hard line, but rather a point at which further investigation should occur. The EPA agreed with the VTDOH that we should not return to the building until further testing and remediation. With this recommendation from the VTDOH and the EPA, we decided to move to remote learning, to continue to test and remediate the site, and to look for alternative sites for in-person instruction. This information was presented to the board and our public at our September board meeting.

Since this time, BHS has settled into full-remote learning, BTC has identified program space and are moving into these spaces, and we have moved aggressively to identify alternate spaces for BHS students to return to in-person instruction. We have identified one site and have reviewed the space to ensure it can house a school. Our architects have provided drawings to envision the layout of the space, and we are working with the owners to better understand the cost. At the same time, district staff is working with consultants to prepare a pilot project intended to test the effectiveness of remediations strategies on the BHS/BTC campus.

We have also heard from families that remote learning is challenging for many students despite the hard work of the teachers, faculty, and leadership. We have heard that isolation is having a negative impact on many students' well-being, and we have heard the call to return to in-person instruction in any way possible, as soon as possible. We have also received and witnessed considerable advocacy from BHS families to return to the BHS building. Families have questioned whether the health concerns outweigh the mental health concerns associated with isolation. We have also heard that our labor partners, the



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Burlington Educators Association (BEA) and American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), are not in support of returning to the BHS building without further testing and remediation that reduces the airborne PCBs. Additionally, the VTDOH continues to work with us to understand our current approach to testing the building and to advise us on next steps.

As a district and board, we are nearing a time for a critical decision on our next steps, and I have outlined three possible scenarios for deliberation:

1. Return to BHS while remediation occurs and the ReEnvisioning Project continues as planned.
2. Move to an alternate location for 2-3 years while remediation and the ReEnvisioning occurs at the BHS site and move back into BHS after the construction is complete.
3. Move to an alternate location for 2-3 years while building a new high school and tech center at our current site or in a new location.

1. Return to BHS while remediation occurs and the ReEnvisioning Project continues as planned.

Strengths: In this option, BHS students and staff would be back in the building they are accustomed to, making for an easy transition and an immediate return to in-person instruction. Students and staff can reduce isolation and improve mental health by reconnecting with friends, teachers, and staff and return to a sense of normalcy in the 2-day a week (ABCAB), hybrid instructional model. Little or no set-up is needed in this option.

Weaknesses: The EPA and DOH have recommended against returning to the building due to air quality and its possible impact on health. The labor unions are not in support of this approach and we would likely face significant staffing issues that may not allow us to operate. We may not have the support of the broader community. Renovation may disrupt learning when it begins (May 2020 or Fall 2020) and may continue for up to three years thereafter. We could spend significant time and money on remediation to be in the building safely and this could take money away from the renovations envisioned by the BHS project. Furthermore, additional environmental issues could be discovered that would increase the complexity of the renovations and add financial pressure to the project.

2. Move to an alternate location for 2-3 years while remediation and the ReEnvisioning occurs at the BHS site and move back into BHS after the construction is complete.

Strengths: This option would allow for in-person instruction in a building that we can remain in until Fall 2024, if needed, allowing plenty of time to renovate BHS. No students would be at BHS at this time leading to a potentially shorter time-frame for overall renovation, possible cost savings, and reduced disruption to learning. This option also eliminates concerns associated with operating a school at an active construction site. Finally, the alternative site could be at a downtown location where all GMT buses stop and start. Being in a new site and at a downtown location opens up many possibilities to rethink deep learning partnerships.

Weaknesses: The alternate site would not be a building that we are accustomed to using, making for another large transition for students and staff. A lot of set-up would be needed, it would not be a



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traditional school design, and there would not be a gym or athletic fields on site. The walls would likely not reach fully to the ceiling and doors may not be the traditional design. We will spend significant funding on set-up and rent, and this will impact our overall budget and may reduce funds allocated for the renovation of BHS.

3. Move to an alternate location for 2-3 years while building a new high school and tech center at our current site or in a new location.

Strengths: This option also allows for in-person instruction in a building that we can remain in until Fall 2024, if needed. This would give us time to thoroughly consider and explore the possibilities and our long-term plans for a permanent location/building. Possibilities could include:

- Demolish BHS and build a new school.
- Rethink the renovation of BHS to include other options, such as expanding the project by redirecting funds from our Capital Plan in order to relocate preschool and central offices to the BHS campus and selling the Ira Allen building to generate more renovation revenue.

In this scenario, no students would be at BHS during construction leading to a potentially shorter time-frame for overall renovation, possible cost savings, and reduced disruption to learning. This option also eliminates concerns associated with operating a school at an active construction site.

Weaknesses: BSD has spent significant time and resources on the BHS/BTC ReEnvisioning plan and we are scheduled to begin construction in the 2021 construction season. Through the ReEnvisioning project, BSD reviewed multiple sites across town to build a new high school. No sites were identified that met the complex needs for the high school, therefore, the decision was made to keep BHS at its current location. This option would set the timeline back to return to a school significantly, it may require identifying an additional alternative site for the high school beyond 2024, and it would be the most costly. We would likely need to ask the voters for additional bonding.

Key Questions:

1. How does the board propose making a decision about our next steps? Should this be a board decision or a district/superintendent decision in consultation with the board?
2. What information will the board need to make or consult on a decision?
3. What are our immediate next steps?