

# Myth at Neshobe School belies it's cramped spaces, security issues

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*The after school SOAR program is wedged into a cramped storage area that it shares with a teacher who helps students with one-on-one math concepts.*

**BY RUSSELL JONES**

BRANDON — When OVUU district voters rejected a \$2.93 million security and improvements bond on Town Meeting Day, about \$2.1 million of that bond was dedicated to improvements and security at Neshobe Elementary School in Forest Dale. But just why did Neshobe need so much for improvements and what will happen now that the bond has been defeated twice?

The answer to that first question is two fold: first, the K-7 school occupies two buildings that are separated by about 100 feet. The original school hosts about 147 kindergarten through second-grade students, who have to trudge across a concrete sidewalk for the six months of the winter daily at lunch breaks, as well as for other larger classes and gatherings (sometimes three-to-four times a day). And secondly, today's space needs for specialized training for some students require more space than two or three decades ago.

Complicating the public perception of the need for the bond is that enrollment at the school has dropped from 524 students when the school's new addition first opened in 1992 to 431 students today. One might think the school has empty rooms and adequate space, but that's not the case.

"It would have been nice if it (the bond) had passed," Neshobe principal Judi Pulsifer said. "There is a myth that Neshobe has empty rooms. That is not the truth, at all."

Pulsifer explained that teaching methods and best practices have changed drastically over the years as educators have developed new ways to engage children in learning, requiring non-traditional practices when those children are non-traditional learners.

In years past the classroom make-up was a more linear design, but today teachers use a more fluid approach to how classrooms work. In short, more students are learning in more places than just the traditional classroom.

Students who need help in a certain subject, like math, can have one-on-one instruction from specially trained interventionists to help them understand a particularly tricky concept. It's more expensive and takes more classroom space, but the focus is on not leaving students behind.

Another change over the decades is that special education students have been integrated with their peer groups, and sensory and motor development learning opportunities are available outside of the classroom for those students requiring this support. Both sometimes require smaller spaces for one-on-one learning in addition to the traditional classrooms.

Students who are dealing with issues outside of the classroom (family problems, health or otherwise) can also speak with a mental health professional who can help them cope and get them back on their path to learning.

It all takes space, which is at a premium at Neshobe.

Currently, Pulsifer said, several of these programs are not functioning at their full potential.

"The mental health offices are in what used to be the assistant principal's office," Pulsifer, who was once the assistant principal who sat in that office, said. "It is a very small space that is shared by two mental health professionals. They do some individual work and they also do some group work, and myself or another teacher sometimes joins to help them feel comfortable, but it gets quite crowded. And when you are doing intakes with parents, that is all confidential so the other worker has to leave the office."

The math interventionist and the afterschool SOAR program share what used to be a storage room, even though that room is only half the size it was as a storage room because the other half now holds the computer servers for the school.

All of this shifting around also causes a shortage of space in a building the community might remember as being adequate for far more students, but that's the myth Pulsifer was talking about.

The school's other storage space is now taken up with HVAC systems and piping, she explained, leaving just minimal storage where the school keeps the lunch tables folded up. Those lunch tables are unfolded every day and set up in the gym, which doubles as a cafeteria, which, in turn, creates another problem.

"When we are setting up the schedule for the year," Pulsifer said during an in-service day on Friday, "we have to set the times when we can use the gym around the lunch times first, and then set the educational block times. I think we should set the educational blocks first according to student needs, but we don't have that luxury."

From a safety perspective, the biggest issue is that the younger children, from Pre-K through second graders, must move from the Forest Dale building to the main school building sometimes up to four or five times a day.

"They come over for lunch and P.E.," Pulsifer explained, "and then for library time, to get snacks, or to see the nurse."



*Young students must leave the Forest Dale building to go to the main building, losing education time in bad weather to put on jackets and gloves.*

During winter months, the children have to stop and put on winter clothes, jackets and mittens before they make the short trip across. As anyone who has ever tried to dress a five-year-old can tell you, this takes time.

"It can take up to 15 minutes to get the whole class ready to go," Pulsifer said, meaning potentially up to an hour of educational time each day is lost to cross that 100 feet.

On top of the buildings' shortcomings, Pulsifer has a age-bubble to worry about as well.

"We have a bubble of children going through that only requires two classes of fourth graders," she said. "Once those go through we will be back to needing three classrooms for each grade."

When that happens, she said, they would have to convert the Learning Center into a classroom and relocate it to a much smaller room that is now the computer lab.

“We currently have Chromebooks for grades four and up, but if we have to shut down the computer lab, we would put some computers in classrooms,” Pulsifer said, “although even that still won’t be adequate.”



*One of the small-group education areas used by necessity is this former kitchen space.*

The \$2.1 million in the bond dedicated to the Neshobe school would have added four more classrooms and a connector link between the two buildings. That’s in addition to the safety features to the entranceway for which grants have already been accepted.

### **WHAT’S NEXT?**

Going forward, district residents could surmise two obvious options: try again with a third bond vote that perhaps tweaks the funding, but stays with the need to fix the infrastructure as noted in the second bond proposal; or drop the idea of seeking funding for improvements and just stay with safety issues that would improve the security of the school’s entranceways.

“I have no idea what the board is going to do next,” Pulsifer said about the school’s next steps. “Unfortunately these tight spaces are our reality here.”

RNESU Supt. Jeanne Collins could not clear up what the board will do next. Collins said the board has not met since Town Meeting, but they have gotten bids on the security improvements for the doors and will pick a vendor and start those improvements during the April break and continue in June.

“The security needs are quite concerning to me,” she said. “The board will hold their first meeting since the bond vote failed on Wednesday and they will discuss the vote and determine the next steps. I would like to see them develop a multi-year plan and try to address the needs of the schools accordingly.”