

Upper Perkiomen Middle School

Mrs. Laurie J. Smith, Principal



Mr. Brian E. Callan, Assistant Principal

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Good afternoon UPSD Parents and Guardians~

I have been spending a lot of time lately thinking about the proposed construction project for a new Middle School and the various opinions from different stakeholders in our school community. I have been very reserved in publicly sharing my opinion as I understand the various perspectives. However, as the Principal of Upper Perkiomen Middle School, I feel it is time to share my personal opinions. Of course, you probably assume that I support the construction of a new building since I'm the principal, and you may even think that my opinion is biased because of that. I DO support this construction project, but I'm not sure you understand why and that is what I'd like to share with you.

I have 19 years of experience in public education, of which 14 have been as a middle school administrator. I absolutely love middle level education! But to be completely honest, I didn't always understand why middle level was so important to the development of our children. Education is the one field in which every single person has an experience because we all went to school. So, we all have an opinion about what worked for us. What worked for educating middle level learners 30 years ago, is no longer best practice. Children, students, and teaching practices have changed. Over the years we have learned that to truly reach the middle level student, we need to meet their social, emotional, and physical needs as well. In addition, the level of content expected of a middle level learner is significantly greater than in the past. Middle schools work to find the delicate balance between student centered, driven learning and rigorous content. Teachers must be competent in their academic content and aware of the needs of our learners. And believe me, middle level learners are a breed of their own. Just spend 10 minutes inside a middle school classroom and you will know why. Hormones and drama run rampant, all the while as we infuse strong content into the classroom.

I am a firm believer that structures should not drive instruction, but that instruction and best practice should drive the structure. Unfortunately, our current middle school facility is driving the programs and instruction we can provide to our students, and it is limiting those opportunities for our students. So, my support of a new middle school has solely to do with providing an appropriate education for the middle level learner and having a facility to support this. For example, our current facility does not support true laboratory instruction in the Science curriculum or appropriate programming in our Technology Education lab. In addition, the foundation of middle level education is team teaching.

Middle school students are at a delicate age where friendships and feeling a part of something is crucial. Teaching teams support students by making them feel part of a larger team. Each team has a name, a logo, a color, a motto that makes them unique. They teach students values such as kindness, perseverance, honesty, and integrity. Teaming is also important for the teachers. It provides them opportunities to discuss student strengths and needs, collaborate and integrate curriculum, and to support each other and our students. There is a wealth of research on the benefits of middle level teaming. If you want to learn more, please visit amle.org which is the website for the Association for Middle Level Education.

Our current facility does not support teaming. Team classrooms need to be located physically close to each other. This minimizes travel time and lost instructional time, as well as supports the integration of various curriculums and collaboration of staff. Our current facility has teams spread out and even across multiple floors. I could go on and on about the benefits of teaming and how a new facility could be designed to support this. Hopefully these few examples begin to give you a picture of true middle level education.

Whether you support the construction of a new middle school or not, I am pleading with you to at least make an informed decision based upon accurate information. I have heard so many inaccurate rumors about the cost of the building or the amount of increase to taxes or just simply that the current facility was good enough for past students it should be good enough now. I don't want the education of our students to be "good enough". I want to provide them with all the opportunities to grow into knowledgeable, contributing citizens to our society. Our students are our future; not only of the Upper Perkiomen Valley, but of our country. And our students deserve a facility that supports, not limits those opportunities.

On January 4, 2017 at 6:30 pm, UPSD will be holding an Act 34 hearing on the construction project. The Act 34 hearing is a required part of a construction process through PlanCon and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. It is a formal hearing, not a school board meeting. There will be an opportunity for public comment at the hearing. I am encouraging everyone to attend and voice their opinion in a respectful manner, regardless of their position. We want to hear from our stakeholders. I know there are many supporters of this project in our community, but your voices have not been heard. It is human nature to be vocal and speak up when we do not agree with something, but we often stay on the sidelines when we do agree. Please attend the hearing and ensure that our School Board hears all the voices.

I also encourage you to visit the UPSD website and click on the link for the MS Construction Project to see available information. There is a frequently asked question document that answers many of the questions we have received over the past months. If you have other questions, please reach out to our Superintendent, Dr. Alexis McGloin, or myself and we will try to answer them for you. The Board has been discussing our facilities since February 2016 and a lot of time and thought have gone into the decisions so far.

I apologize for the length of this letter, but felt it was important for you to hear my opinion as the leader of your school. I believe I was hired to make UPMS the best that it can be and I take this duty seriously. I will always advocate for the best interests of our students and no matter what happens with this project, I can assure you that the UPMS staff and myself will continue to work hard for our students.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. Please let me know if I can be of any assistance in helping you formulate your opinion on this project. I truly hope to see you on January 4, 2017 at 6:30 pm at the Educational Center.

Happy Holidays,



Laurie Smith