

THEIR VIEW

Parent voices concerns

I have a child that attends Shelby Hills Early Childhood Center on an IEP this year. This is the fourth year that I've had a child at Shelby Hills. Given the changes coming from Sidney City Schools (SCS), planned for next year, I decided I should learn more about what was changing. This week I have put in over 20 hours of research, discussion, calculations and suggestions working between SCS and Shelby Hills. I have spoken with SCS Superintendent Bob Humble, SCS Treasurer Mike Watkins, SCS Director of Special Education Chris Barr and SCS Communications Coordinator Tiffany Rank, as well as Shelby County Board of Developmental Disabilities Superintendent Leigh Anne Wenning and Shelby County Board of Developmental Disabilities Business Director Tyler Davis. You will read below that I have some concerns I believe the community needs to understand.

You may wonder, why am I writing this today? I wondered that myself. For me, much of my life is geared towards supporting and developing my children. Since I currently have a child at Shelby Hills that would make this transition in 2019, I want to make sure this is best for him. There was a lot of public feedback on social media and I was interested to understand the facts. Also, I live and work within the SCS district, so I am a taxpayer. I want to understand how those taxes are being spent and what is planned for that money. Lastly, I solve problems for a living and make fact-based decisions on a regular basis; I felt my skills could be useful in this situation.

I first found out about this proposed transition from a notification phone call from Shelby Hills and information posted on their website. My wife started to investigate it and found a Facebook page with a lot of public comments; some favorable and many unfavorable.

Shortly after this, we attended an IEP meeting at Shelby Hills to create an updated plan for my son. During this time, the proposal was discussed and there seemed to be very little knowledge or clarity of what was happening when from the Shelby Hills staff. At this point, I decided I needed to understand more from SCS. I found their 'FAQS About Preschool' webpage. Through this was linked the school's five-year budget forecast. As I dug into it, I started to understand why this was being reviewed and saw that financially, the increasing charges from Shelby Hills would be difficult to manage. When SCS announced a proposal meeting for Wednesday, Jan. 9, I decided I would attend and gain some answers to my financial questions, as well as understand what SCS was proposing for the pre-school operation, staff, and building plans. This started a two-day scramble to pull people together and get feedback because I generated more questions than answers. And, the board was going to be voting by Monday. There is not a lot of time to learn and act between the communication meeting and the board meeting.

What I've learned is that if it were purely financial, SCS should keep the pre-school at Shelby Hills. Let me explain why. Through the re-configuration plan, SCS has realized they are overstaffed by 25 members made up of a mix of teachers, aids and supporting staff. If SCS goes through with the re-configuration but DOES NOT bring the pre-school into their school, then they will have to lay off 25 staff members who are no longer needed. By bringing the pre-school in-house, SCS can keep their current staff and may need to add some more. However, this results in 20 or more staff members being laid



Chad Dagenfield
Contributing columnist

off at Shelby Hills. So, either way, our community is going to take a hit.

If SCS reduces their staff by 25 members and pays Shelby Hills for pre-school, their budget would see approximately \$225,000 to \$1.4

million reduction of expenses; even WITH the increased costs from Shelby Hills. However, if the pre-school is moved in house and the staff count is kept current, there is an estimated cost of \$100,000 increase in expenses for the district. The large range of savings is because SCS has not evaluated this fully yet and an average salary plus benefits cost cannot be created. I've used values provided by SCS and Shelby Hills for all calculations. I have shared these with SCS and have not received feedback. Not included in this estimate is how much it will cost to: train staff to meet the state requirements for pre-school and educating children with developmental disabilities; complete renovations of the building to meet MINIMUM state requirements; revenue that may come in from charging "typical" children for pre-school.

Based on the numbers above, this cannot be a financial decision to drive this. There are many other social benefits that SCS has listed on the FAQS webpage to the transition of bringing pre-school in-house. However, the timing of the transition does not affect the social benefits. Based on my discussions with SCS administration, I've received feedback that the fall of 2020 would be preferred, and that was the original plan. Due to discussions with Shelby Hills, SCS felt it necessary to move that date up to the fall of 2019 instead. As a matter of fact, they are proposing to extend the summer by roughly two and a half weeks to provide more time to complete all the changes.

I have had discussions

with superintendents of both schools and have found a path to move forward with a 2020 transition, instead of 2019. SCS have discussed it, and decided they were too far down the path to move it out now. I feel the board hasn't even voted on it, so there is barely even a path right now. I have gotten feedback from Shelby Hills that this concept below could be pitched to the Shelby County Board of Developmental Disabilities, if SCS wanted to pursue it.

Here is the plan:

- Re-configure K-5 as discussed at the Wednesday, Jan. 9 meeting. This provides 25 excess staff members available from SCS.

- Send 2-4 people to attend IEP meetings at Shelby Hills to get familiar with the parents, children's needs and potential complications in the classroom.

- Shelby Hills is concerned of losing staff throughout the 2019/2020 school year, since many won't have jobs the following year anyway. As this happens, SCS can provide substitutes with their available staff to get classroom experience in this pre-school as well as gain experience working with the children.

- Allow some staff to spend a full year focused on their education and training requirements to quickly come up to speed and prepare for the new pre-school.

- Transition children to the better prepared and organized SCS pre-school in the 2020/2021 school year.

In closing, I ask that parents and folks of the district show up to the board meeting on Monday, Jan. 14 and let the board know that this is moving too fast. They plan to have a vote on Monday. Ask for a vote to delay or delay the vote all together. There are too many unknowns at this point. The best thing for the children is to slow down a little bit, prepare a more defined plan, and build confidence with the community.

Dagenfield is a parent of a Shelby Hills student.