

Board of Education Cooking Up Plans for Expanding High School Cafeteria

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The Darien High School Cafeteria is so loud "you cannot really hear yourself think" a school official said. Even worse, it's become too small as the school population has expanded — and, still worse, the population is expected to get bigger when the current 7th grade gets into the high school in a few years.

It's already so bad that students will leave the cafeteria to eat somewhere else in the building (or, in warmer seasons, outside).

So the Facilities Committee of the Board of Education, working with consultants, has been looking into expansion plans for the room. Committee Chairman David Dineen on Tuesday night presented an outline of the committee's proposal to the full board.

Dineen presented a plan that's expected to cost almost \$1.2 million. He showed the board a floor plan of the room (pictures of which are attached to this article). The committee is proposing to make more space for students by moving the Faculty Lounge from its current location to somewhere else in the building (the Faculty Lounge is in the upper righthand corner of the floor plan).

Another feature of the plan is a "bump out" or extension of the cafeteria out toward the large inner courtyard of the school (the wall on the far side of the playing fields and track that the cafeteria looks out on).

The result of those expansions would bring the room, now designed to hold 340 students, to a new capacity of 431 students. The school has four separate seatings, and which seating a student has depends on which class the student is in at lunchtime — and the eight-period schedule changes from day to day.

To deal with excessive sound in the cafeteria (it was Dineen who said you couldn't hear yourself think in the room), noise-reducing flooring would be installed. Details about that were scarce at the meeting.

The cafeteria is currently on three separate levels, with concrete floors raised from the lowest to the highest levels in tiers. The different tiers aren't necessary for any structural reasons, Dineen said — they were just added for aesthetic reasons.

To remove them (which might make the room more flexible for other uses and easier to rearrange the seating plan) would raise the cost of the plan by another half million dollars, he said, so that idea was dropped.

High School Principal Ellen Dunn and Schools Superintendent Dan Brenner told the board that the teachers love the nearly hourlong period (known as the "power hour") that is scheduled in next to the lunch periods (called "lunch waves"). So school officials were hoping to retain that.

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Some lunch waves have adequate seating, but because particular classrooms are tied to particular lunch

waves, and class sizes in those rooms can differ, some lunch waves can be too large, "and it's kind of like musical chairs," Brenner said. For those periods, students are "eating all over the building," he said.

There is already a room for the faculty on the second floor of the building, Dineen said, and that might serve as space for lunch.

With the redesign and noise reduction work, the room would be more likely to be used by students who want a place to study or even for classes or other groups looking for space, Dineen said.

Details of the proposal are not yet baked in: Dineen said the plan needs to be reviewed by teachers and administrators, and the Board of Finance will want to see it (the Finance Board had asked that planning for the cafeteria expansion be done early on, he said).

At a later point, the proposal, perhaps with a pinch of this or a dash of that (or some replacement ingredients), will be up for approval by the Board of Education, probably as part of deliberations over a number of capital projects.