

Introduction

This is the study report pursuant to N.C. General Statute §115C-72 on the question of closing Marine Science and Technologies (MaST) Early College High School. MaST is a “cooperative innovative high school program,” commonly known as an “early college,” formed in 2018 and jointly operated by the Carteret County Public School System and Carteret Community College. On June 20 of this year the school board, on a split vote, expressing concerns over state and local funding for the school and acknowledging a preference of the County Board of Commissioners to use its appropriation for teacher retention, adopted a motion reallocating the local funding for MaST “to fund as many unfunded teaching positions as possible.” While the sentiment of the school board on June 20 was that MaST would need to be closed, the June 20 action was not effective to close the school and the motion anticipated additional procedures to that end. The action was not “illegal,” it simply was not effective to close the school. It did, however, start a process that could lead to closure. On July 27 the school board appointed a committee to implement statutory compliance on the question of closing MaST. On July 2 the committee met, authorized this study, and devised a schedule for further proceedings.

MaST cannot be closed until the school board members consider this study, hear from the public at a public hearing, debate the issues among themselves and take a vote. If the sentiment of the majority expressed on June 20 has changed, MaST will open for the fall semester. If the sentiment has not changed, closure is provided in the general law of our state.

A considerable amount of information is needed for a study of this nature. Much of the relevant information is available to administrators in the school superintendent’s office and a team of administrators was pressed into service to gather the data. From the amount of information in this study, it is evident that the team members exerted considerable effort.

It is fair to presume that many on the administrative team gathering data did not relish their tasks. Some, perhaps all, were instrumental in establishing MaST and firmly believe in its mission and its efficacy. Participating in any procedure that could lead to the closing of the school is not how they expected to spend part of their summer.

A key concern on the question of a school closure is the welfare of the students who will be affected. For this reason, school administrators contacted as many of the MaST students and their parents as could be located to solicit statements on the impact to the students. Many of the parents and students did respond. The responses are included in the study for consideration by the School Board. I initially thought we would summarize these responses for the study, but their sheer numbers and often their length made that impractical. We opted instead to let the parents and their students use their own words to describe the impact of closing MaST on them. Federal law and school board policy prohibit the public release of most personally identifiable information about students. For this reason, all such information has been redacted from the student/parent impact statements (as well as from any other document in the report that references identifiable children). Administrators verified the identity of those responding before the redactions.

The student/parent impact statements are often poignant and passionate. I believe every person involved regrets any angst experienced by the students and their parents this summer.

The question of closing a school starts somewhere. Regardless of the means and methods, discussions of closing a school are bound to raise apprehensions among those invested in the school. So, once the question of closing MaST was raised in whatever form or manner, and a study commenced, it is likely we would have experienced much of the intensity that has been brought to the question over the last month.

In conducting the study, school principals were asked to comment on the impact of MaST on their schools. Initially only the high school principals were to be surveyed, but it was quickly observed that the high school principals did not know the students who were enrolled at MaST. While they might have observations about impacts – positive or negative – on their schools, the bulk of the MaST students were coming straight from 8th Grade in our traditional middle schools. The survey was then extended to include our middle school principals.

It is perhaps a fact that *all* the principals were uncomfortable being asked for comments about a topic that was increasingly the subject of great and passionate public discourse. Not only that, they are aware that many in school administration support MaST at a time when elected officials, both locally and in Raleigh, are expressing doubts about early college – most often connected to funding. We considered the possibility of anonymous comments from the principals but rejected that because of the very public nature of this issue. Not only that, but principals in the Carteret County Public Schools are a unique corps. First, they all were successful teachers who all exhibited great communication and leadership skills which moved them into positions of school administration. They all demonstrate personal integrity. They are women and men of strong character. And while exceptional individual leaders, they are also good team members. Above all else, they love students, fully understanding the concept of tough love, and want every single child in their schools to excel. Even with reservations and a good deal of apprehension, as expressed by one or more, all the principals offered the comments they were asked to provide.

From the comments of these exceptional leaders, it is evident some have differing views on the way our cooperative innovative high school was implemented. It will be up to the School Board to weigh these views.

Carteret Community College is also a partner in MaST and its President, Dr. John Hauser, is a passionate advocate for the school. He has provided an abundance of information regarding MaST in particular, and early colleges across the state in general. All information provided is included in the study for consideration by the School Board. MaST was able to open last school year largely through Dr. Hauser's efforts to find funding.

The core data and information included in the study was provided by many different individuals. It was assembled along the lines of the outline approved by the MaST School Board committee. At times additional information, essentially either public records or data easily obtained through the school system's central office, was gathered and included in the study for clarity and basic information. All the data and information was submitted to my office to assemble and put in final study report form. The administrative team at the central office specifically formulated some responses to some of the topics in the MaST committee's outline. Those responses are clearly identified. When assembling the information for this study report,

occasionally I observed that something needed clarifying or explaining. For these purposes, I generally wrote text that begins with “Note” or “Notes” and all the footnotes. For general background, I added Sections 1 through 4. Section 5 begins the responses to the study outline approved by the MaST committee.

In closing, I want to point out that the final question on the future of MaST will be decided by the Carteret County Board of Education. These are seven individuals who chose to stand for election to the school board because of their love for children and their wishes that every child in our county has abundant opportunities for an excellent education. They are essentially volunteers who give countless hours in public service away from their families and often their jobs. Many are business people and all are schooled in the realities of budgets. There are approximately 8,100 students enrolled in our school system. Each student is important to every board member. The board members will weigh the information in this report carefully and they will take all comments at the public hearing under consideration. The people of this county can count on the board to make the right final decision, whatever it may be.

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