

## Media Contact

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## Middletown Parents To Pack Forum, Say 'No' To School Closures

MIDDLETOWN – Families opposing a school closure plan that would impact several Middletown communities are set to speak out Wednesday at the first of four budget forums, demanding a different solution that protects quality education while respecting taxpayers.

The forum held at Middletown High School North follows the district's surprise announcement on March 18 of a plan to close Navesink Elementary School (209 students) and Leonardo Elementary School (284 students) and turn Bayshore Middle School into a combined elementary facility.

The displaced Bayshore students (current enrollment is 534) would be redistricted to either Thorne Middle School or Thompson Middle School. In addition, hundreds of students who would have gone to Middletown High School South would be redistricted to Middletown High School North.

"Our schools are the heart of our communities and why we chose to raise our families in Middletown," said Kristin Rooney, president of the Navesink Parent-Teacher Association, before the meeting. "We know that there is a better way forward that does not involve closing them. We are coming together as a community to put forth a plan that saves our schools and also puts us on a path to be successful in the future."

Middletown Superintendent Jessica Alfone blamed the potential closures on a previously unannounced \$10 million budget deficit. But parents fear the plan will harm class sizes, education standards, property values and the character of their neighborhoods, all with no guarantee the district will save money in the long run.

The families who are part of the grassroots Save Middletown Schools (SMS) initiative have mobilized against the closures in several ways, from signs dotting Middletown that call on the school board to protect their communities, to email campaigns and impromptu demonstrations. They are in a race against the clock, with the board set to vote April 30 on a final budget.

The district hasn't been transparent with families, said Nancy Borriello, treasurer of the Leonardo Parent-Teacher Association.

"Leonardo Grade School has an amazing spirit and a strong commitment to academic performance," Borriello said, speaking before Wednesday's meeting. "It's a home away from home for students, and the surprise news that it could close has sent shock waves through our town."

"The proposed plan is filled with holes," she added. "Will closing two elementary schools and consolidating a middle school truly save money after accounting for the costs of preparing the remaining facilities for students and faculty by September 2025? These straightforward, unanswered questions have left us shaking our heads and scared about the future."

SMS has urged district leaders to act in good faith and explore all reasonable budget alternatives. No solution ultimately chosen by the board should mean closing schools.

On Monday, Superintendent Alfone suggested that raising the 4.88 percent tax levy that the board tentatively approved on March 18 could generate an additional \$8.4 million in revenue. Any such increase would only impact the school portion of taxpayers' bills, and, when compared to the closure plan, would amount to a difference of less than a dollar per day for a house assessed at \$729,000.

The conversation about modifying the levy follows years of the school board increasing taxes but ultimately failing to adjust that funding in line with inflation – a practice that has helped fuel the current deficit.

SMS remains eager to see further results from Alfone's pledge to vet budget alternatives. As the conversation unfolds, the community deserves detailed context for every proposed solution, free from gamesmanship.

Amid the closure announcement, Bayshore students have channeled their creativity in positive ways, such as making posters and writing letters, according to Sandy Lambe and Jennifer Bentley of Bayshore's Parent Teacher Organization.

"As parents, we are proud to have our children involved in the many outstanding programs at Bayshore," Lambe and Bentley said, praising the school's teachers and staff. "From Bayshore Buddies, which provides incredible support for students with special needs, to student council, the school newspaper, the school band and athletics, our children are thriving."

Apart from Wednesday's session, the district has scheduled three other forums: Monday, March 31, 6-8 p.m., Thompson Gymnasium; Wednesday, April 9, 6-8 p.m., High School North Auditorium; Thursday, April 10, 6-8 p.m. High School South Gymnasium.

For more information, visit <https://savemiddletownschoools.org>.