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## **TUSD proposes reopening south-side middle school that was closed as a cost-saving measure**

By Danyelle Khmara Arizona Daily Star Dec 7, 2019 Updated 21 hrs ago



TUSD is under a court order to achieve greater equity and diversity in its schools. When Wakefield was closed to save costs in 2013, the student body was more than 93% Latino.

A.E. Araiza / Arizona Daily Star 2001

Nearly seven years after shuttering a south-side school in an effort to cut costs amid declining student enrollment, TUSD is proposing to reopen Wakefield Middle School.

It is Tucson Unified's hope that Wakefield — on West 44th Street near South Sixth Avenue — will feature specialized programming that would put the school at the same level as TUSD's high-achieving Dodge Traditional Magnet Middle School.

The proposal to reopen the school, which could come at a cost of about \$2 million, has garnered mixed responses, mostly because of disagreements on how the district should spend its limited resources, whether TUSD has enough students to warrant a new middle school, and doubts about the south-side school attracting a diverse student body.

When Wakefield closed, the student body was more than 93% Latino, according to a proposal filed in the district's 45-year-old desegregation case. The racial makeup is important because TUSD is under a court order to achieve greater equity and diversity in its schools.

TUSD's enrollment decline, which was plummeting for years, slowed dramatically from last year to this one, 169 students down on its 40th-day count, compared to losing 1,418 students last year.

Reopening Wakefield would cost between \$2 million and \$2.5 million, with about \$1.5 million needed to renovate the library, locker rooms and kitchen, according to the district's proposal. The school also needs upgrades to technology infrastructure.

Though TUSD struggles financially to meet the operational needs of its 80-plus campuses, Superintendent Gabriel Trujillo says the school is needed right now to alleviate overcrowding in sixth through eighth grades at nearby campuses, including Hollinger K-8, C.E. Rose K-8 and Drachman Montessori Magnet, all within a two-mile range.

All these schools are over capacity in grades sixth through eighth, Trujillo says.

“We’re exploding with enrollment on the west side and in the southwest,” he said. “This is a way for us to be able to meet the enrollment needs on this side of town.”

The proposal to reopen Wakefield has been filed in federal court for consideration by the court and the special master, a desegregation expert appointed by the court to oversee the TUSD’s efforts.

## EXPANSION AT A COST

If the proposal is approved, Wakefield would accept a sixth-grade class each year for three years of 80 to 150 students each until there are all three middle-school grades for a total of about 400 students at the school.

Wakefield would have no neighborhood boundaries, meaning all students would apply through a lottery.

The district estimates that 90% of the Wakefield students would come from TUSD schools. Students who don’t attend a district school but live in TUSD and students from other districts would make up 10% of the student body, according to the proposal.

The district estimates that 70% of the students would live within five miles of the school. A number of TUSD schools that would lose potential students are already under-enrolled, according to the proposal.

Utterback Middle, for example, which is designed for 1,225 students, only has 343 enrolled and could lose an additional 25 students to the new school.

Another example is Pistor, with a capacity for 1,025 students but only 868 enrolled, could lose 33 students to the new school. Although Pistor enrollment is not at capacity, the school grew by 86 students this year, according to TUSD 40-day enrollment numbers.

Sylvia Campoy, a representative for the Latino plaintiffs in the decades-old desegregation case, says the proposal is “quite vague/sketchy” and “raises many questions and concerns.”

The Mendoza plaintiffs are concerned that the new school would only exacerbate the enrollment decline at schools like Utterback Middle and Safford K-8, Campoy wrote in an email.

“Currently, the Mendoza plaintiffs believe that the district’s attention and resources are better focused on enrollment and academic student achievement at its existing middle schools, especially Utterback,” she said.

Despite the district’s projections, Trujillo doesn’t think that many students will go to Wakefield when they live near schools as far away as Utterback, about three miles to the east. He thinks most of the students will be neighborhood kids, coming from the nearby schools that are overcrowded.

“It’s not viable for the families to make the trek in from the Valencia neighborhood and the Pistor neighborhood all the way into central-south Tucson,” he said. “So I’m not sure that’s a viable argument that we’re going to see students from that far out coming into south Tucson.”

Jihane Rohrbaker, a parent at Magee Middle School and vice president of the school’s PTSA said the funding would be better spent on teacher salaries and infrastructure upgrades rather than opening a new school.

“I don’t understand how they can spend \$2.5 million on a new school when we can’t even fund the schools we already have,” she said. “Why are we not spending the money, if we have it, on current schools that need it the most?”

The Wakefield proposal predicts that Magee, which is already under-enrolled, would lose 10 students to the new school. Magee is across town on Tucson's east side, about 13 miles away from Wakefield.

School funding is largely based on student enrollment numbers. When a school loses too many students, it becomes less financially viable.

Trujillo says the district as a whole will be more financially stable as long as students stay in the district. TUSD can open the new school and improve the existing middle schools at the same time, he says.

“I don't subscribe to the belief that the district can't do two things at once,” he said. “We have too many performance indicators that say that this district is not perfect but it's moving forward, and I believe that we can reform our middle schools and do great things at our middle schools and also open up this new opportunity in the Wakefield neighborhood.”

## “LAB SCHOOL”

One way the district plans to make the school high-achieving is by implementing a “lab school” in partnership with the University of Arizona. Wakefield would experiment with “new approaches and expectations for students” with a “grow-our-own” training ground for future TUSD teachers, the proposal says.

The school will employ a cohort of master teachers who would work directly with student teachers — one mentor for every two new teachers, Trujillo said.

TUSD currently has a teacher mentorship program, which would differ from the new program in that new teachers would work more closely with their mentors, Trujillo says. The current mentors have caseloads of about 10 new teachers.

The Mendoza plaintiffs say the district would do better to implement this type of training and support for teachers at existing schools, Campoy says.

Magee parent Rohrbacker says her son's seventh-grade honors science class has had substitutes since the teacher left near the beginning of the school year.

"Subs come and go, but they're not learning," she said about her son and his peers. "When you don't have a stable presence, it's always going to have an effect, negatively."

The district hopes that this new program will essentially be a teacher-training ground to alleviate the teacher shortage, which TUSD and the entire state suffer from. Wakefield would pilot the program and then seek to replicate it in other TUSD middle schools, the proposal says.

The goal is to train high-quality teachers who then stay in TUSD, Trujillo said.

Two important objectives of reopening Wakefield are offering high-quality education to traditionally underserved students and providing "an integrated middle school in a racially concentrated area" of the district, the proposal says.

A majority of TUSD students are Hispanic, so integration typically means attracting more kids who are white, black, Native American and Asian.

The district plans to diversify the school in a few ways, including providing an express bus for families in certain areas, targeted recruitment where there are white or white and Hispanic fifth-grade through eighth-grade students who live in but do not attend TUSD, and a modified lottery system that would admit higher numbers of black and Native American students. The typical lottery system, which factors race, attempts to mirror the district enrollment averages as a whole.

Campoy doubts these efforts will lead to an integrated school. The closest middle schools, Utterback, Safford and Hollinger K-8, aren't integrated. In 2017, Safford and Utterback both lost their magnet status because of it, which resulted in a loss of teachers and programs, Campoy says.

Trujillo said while the goal is diversity and integration everywhere, not every school is going to be fully integrated.

“The opportunity that we’re going to be providing, in this neighborhood, in this community, is going to touch predominantly underserved student populations, and that’s a big win,” he said. “Yes, we expect to increase diversity through open enrollment, but I can’t make a guarantee that any school will be 100% integrated.”

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### Did you know?

Since Wakefield has been closed, the campus has been converted into Wakefield Family Resource Center, offering community classes, a food pantry, clothing bank and parent groups, among other services.

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Danyelle joined the Star in 2018 and covers K-12 education. Previously, Danyelle wrote for the Tucson Weekly where she won several statewide awards including story of the year and first place investigative reporting.