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Bill revives elementary school in Worthington

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WORTHINGTON – The town of Worthington is free to reclaim full control of public elementary education, breaking away from the Gateway Regional School District.

Gov. Deval Patrick signed special legislation this week that allows Worthington to withdraw from the regional district and reopen the Russell H. Conwell School as a public school serving elementary students.

The change takes effect with the 2015-16 school year.

“It’s the little town that could,” said Deborah Carnes Reilly, a member of the ad hoc education committee created by the Select Board five years ago, at the urging of residents, to bring a public elementary school back to Worthington.

The historic Conwell school was shut by Gateway in an austerity move in 2010 that closed three elementary

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GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Students leave the Russell H. Conwell School in Worthington for the last time before the school closed in 2010.

Worthington gets its school back

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schools. Worthington students were bused to a school in the Littleville section of Huntington.

“It really did take the whole town,” Carnes Reilly said of the effort to restore public education in the town. “It’s been intense. It’s just phenomenal what the town has done for the school.”

The Conwell school now operates as a private school known as the R.H. Conwell Community Education Center. That program will transition into a public school. It is hoped that many of its staff members will stay on, according to Paul Dunphy, an aide to state Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington.

On Monday, state Education Secretary Matthew H. Malone will visit Worthington to tour the Conwell school and speak with officials about the change. He will also visit the school remodeling project under way in Williamsburg, according to Dunphy.

Kulik said Saturday that the loss of the elementary school in 2010 was a blow to Worthington. “It was important to the economic viability of the community and the social fabric of the town.” Not having a public school in town reduced the town’s attractiveness to new families and threatened its growth. “All those things were missing after the school closed.”

Next steps

Once the town officially withdraws from Gateway, the legislation calls for state education officials to review and approve a plan by Worthington to operate an independent public school, from pre-kindergarten up to Grade 6.

Above that grade, Worthington is expected to send students to the Hampshire Regional School District in Westhampton and to cover those tuition costs without becoming a member of the district.

Carnes Reilly said Worthington will need to form a new local school committee. The ad hoc committee submitted what she called a detailed plan to

the state on how Conwell would operate. “There will be a few things we’ll need to fill in.”

Former Hatfield Superintendent Fran Gougeon served as a consultant to the ad hoc committee, helping it prepare to run a public school and its own district. Carnes Reilly said members of the committee paused at a meeting to note the milestone signing of the legislation Wednesday, but quickly returned to business at hand. “We still felt we needed to figure out what the next steps were.”

Reception in town to the legislation’s approval has been mostly positive, Carnes Reilly said, though some residents are concerned about rising education expenses the town will have to carry in the future.

Before the public school’s planned reopening in September 2015, the private program hopes to get through one more year. It faces financial uncertainty.

In a message on the education center’s website, its leaders say: “Our current funding sources will not be able to support us to the extent that they have for our last year as a private community school. Our community does not want to send its children away from town for one year.”

It asks for help in raising \$300,000 to keep the program going in the coming school year.

“Your donation will go directly to the school so we can remain open during this bridge year from private back to a public school,” the message reads.

Bowing out

The legislation, shaped by Kulik and state Sen. Benjamin Downing, D-Pittsfield, came after residents of six other member towns of the Gateway district refused, at town meetings in 2013, to allow Worthington to withdraw. The other member towns are Blandford, Chester, Huntington, Middlefield, Montgomery and Russell.

Residents of Worthington who pressed for the change said it was in part an effort to restore the presence of a public school as a social center in the community.

Kulik told the Gazette last year that the shift is not likely to reduce education costs for Worthington taxpayers, but noted that was not the objective. “I think they just feel that they can provide a better education for their students here in Worthington,” he said in an earlier interview.

He said Saturday that the legislation requires that remaining Gateway district members get help in making the transition to a six-town district. The loss of Worthington, starting with the 2015-16 school year, is expected to take about \$630,000 out of its available funding. The six district towns are likely to face increased costs of 6 to 7 percent without Worthington’s membership.

Kulik, who lives in Worthington, noted that he represents four of the seven towns in the current district and it was important to him to find ways for the district to move forward.

He said he believes the legislation received careful scrutiny in its 10-month trip through the Legislature, where lawmakers heard from opponents of Worthington’s withdrawal, as well as supporters.

“This turns out to be a pretty positive way to solve a really big problem,” Kulik said.

The Conwell school is located at 147 Huntington Road.

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