



**HIGHLAND FALLS-FORT MONTGOMERY
CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT**
Mr. Michael McElduff, Superintendent of Schools

PreK-6th Grade FAQ

The District has determined the temporary closure of Fort Montgomery Elementary School for the 2024-2025 school year is necessary to ensure the Capital Project stays on schedule. Delays in the New York State Department of Education project review process have led to this decision. Despite submitting our project for review in late October of 2023, approval has not yet been granted as of May 30, 2024, causing the review time to exceed over 28 weeks. As mentioned in the Superintendent's letter to the community on May 30, 2024, this course of action is needed to meet project deadlines and exercise financial prudence.

Please find below additional information for families and community members to assist with the transition process.

General Questions and Answers:

- **Did the school district and school board know about this delay and option prior to the budget vote? And, if so, why weren't the voters alerted?**
 - The community was informed of delays with the State Education Department (SED) as early as December/January. The superintendent corresponded with Senator Skoufis, Senator Schumer, Senator Gillibrand, Congressman Ryan, and Assemblymember Eachus regarding our concerns with the SED delays. Their support was greatly appreciated, with some of them writing letters or contacting SED on our behalf. SED communicated that unless a project is deemed an emergency, it cannot be expedited. The district explored the possibility of categorizing the FMES project as an emergency, but SED did not approve this request. On April 18th, Triton and BCA presented to the Board of Education (BOE) and the community about escalating concerns regarding the delays and indicated that alternative options would need to be considered. The community voted on the Capital Project in March 2023, which is separate from the recent budget vote that occurred on May 21st. The alternative option was not presented to the community earlier as it was finalized on Thursday, May 23, 2024. After receiving financial analysis, the district made the decision to move forward with this option. Additionally, a meeting was held with Triton and BCA on May 29th to confirm that this was the most feasible option and to ensure that it could be completed within the next 11 months.

- **What serious consideration has been given to reopening HFES? I realize the condition it is in, but focusing on getting it in usable condition, instead of all of the machinations and adjustments for moving 7 grades of students, opening this building and relocating the Fort school population there seems like a more feasible solution.**
 - The district thoroughly explored the option of renovating the HFES as part of the Capital Project that was approved in March of 2023. Through working with our Architect, Construction Management team, or financial advisors (RGT) and having discussion with SED it was not deemed a viable or fiscally responsible direction for the district to go. Temporarily moving grade levels around for one school year is the most economical solution.
- **We seem to have a plethora of administrators and consultants for a district that educates less than 1200 students. If we close a building, are all administrators and consultants remaining? And if so, justify that please with only 2 operational buildings.**
 - The district has a limited number of consultants hired each year and recently reduced funding for consultants for the 2024-2025 school year prior to the budget approval. The decision to temporarily close FMES for one year was made with consideration for the well-being of the faculty, staff, administration, and students. It was determined that removing administrators and educators for a year, only to rehire them the following year, was not in the best interest of all parties involved.
- **Why can't we begin the FMES Capital Project during the fall of 2024?**
 - The district's architecture and construction management team has determined that relocating the building occupants is necessary due to the extensive staging, rock removal, and use of large machinery required for the project. Originally scheduled to commence on July 1, 2024, the project start date has now been delayed to mid-late August due to delays with the SED approval process. The district prioritizes the health and safety of its faculty, staff, and students and recognizes that conducting this work while the building is occupied poses safety concerns.
- **Why can't they conduct staging, rock removal etc. after school hours? This would seem like a better solution than closing the school for an entire year.**
 - After careful consideration, it was determined that due to the time constraints imposed by the initial 8 weeks of the project and potential disruptions to the community caused by daily staging and loud rock removal activities, it would not be feasible to complete the project outside of regular working hours. Safety concerns also played a significant role in the decision not to proceed with the initial phase of the FMES Capital Project.
- **If the Fort Montgomery Elementary School is closing, where are the students in Pre-K through 2nd grade going?**
 - The Highland Falls Intermediate School will house students from Pre-K through 6th grade for the 2024-2025 school year.
- **Where are students in 7th and 8th grade going next year?**

- Students in the 7th and 8th grades will be transitioning to James I. O’Neill High School for the upcoming 2024-2025 academic year. This decision follows a previous practice of relocating these grade levels to the high school during renovation projects.
- **How do I know if my students qualify for bussing transportation?**
 - Students who attend James I. O’Neill will be provided bussing, which is the current practice. Students in grades K-6 attending HFIS next academic year will adhere to the established transportation guidelines. To be eligible for bussing, students must reside beyond .7 miles from the school. If a student's residence is within .7 miles, transportation to and from school must be arranged by a parent, guardian, older sibling, etc. Bussing will continue to be available for Pre-K students regardless of their proximity to the school.
- **I can see parking to be a major problem at both HFIS and JIO next year. How does the district plan to handle the added faculty, staff and visitors throughout the school year?**
 - The district will begin improvements to the Highland Falls Elementary School parking lot, including the addition of 10-15 parking spots. This expansion should accommodate the needs of faculty, staff, and visitors. JIO is also planning to add 6-8 parking spots, but recognizes this may not be enough for additional faculty and staff. As a result, the possibility of implementing a lottery system for senior parking next year is being considered. Further information will be communicated to families throughout the summer regarding this matter.
- **When should I expect my child’s schedule for the 24-25 school year?**
 - As a result of the district's decision to implement significant changes, the building administrators and their Master Schedule Committees will need some time to prepare schedules. The committees will commence working on the intricate schedules during the first week of June. Administration will communicate updates regarding the release of schedules.
- **Why did the district wait so long to inform the community? I feel like they could have done a better job of making us all aware there was a concern with the Capital Project?**
 - The district has engaged in discussions over the past 2-3 months regarding the timeline for the SED project during the Board of Education meetings. Furthermore, the district's architect and construction management team provided a comprehensive presentation during the April 18th Board of Education meeting regarding the challenges in commencing the FMES Capital Project on schedule. They highlighted to both the Board of Education and the community that they were exploring alternative strategies to ensure timely completion of the FMES project. Unfortunately, due to the damages incurred at the HFIS gymnasium, the district had to reassess its priorities and develop a plan to address this issue. The

district received an update during the week of May 20th that repairs to the HFIS gymnasium could be completed before the start of the 2024-2025 school year. This allowed the district to finalize the temporary closure of FMES and pivot in a new direction.

- **Will the CONNECT program be offered to all students at HFIS? Will Healthy Kids be offered to our younger students?**
 - The District has informed the CONNECT program of the upcoming changes and they are working on how they will proceed for the 2024-2025 school year. The same contact has been made to Healthy Kids and they will discuss their plan in the coming weeks.
- **Why can't we permanently shutdown FMES, this would save a lot of money?**
 - This is a temporary measure to address the needs of FMES and complete the full renovation in a timely and cost effective fashion. The current facilities at FMES lack dedicated spaces for Art, Music, and STREAM programs, as well as a suitable Library space for students. For the 24-25 school year, HFIS students will have Art and Music classes in their classrooms, due to the spaces needed for the incoming Pre-k through 2nd grade classrooms. Temporary walls will be erected to accommodate the increased number of students, faculty, and staff transitioning from FMES as well. While this is not an ideal situation for our district, vacating FMES to complete the project will provide our faculty, staff, and students with the quality educational spaces they deserve for the 2025-2026 school year.
- **What time will school be starting for HFIS next year?**
 - Students in grades Kindergarten through 6th grade will commence school at 8:00 am and will conclude at 3:00 pm. Pre-K students will attend from 8:30 am to 2:30 pm. As we move through the summer, the school administration will provide further information on arrival and dismissal procedures.
- **The HFIS playground has equipment that is not suitable for students in Pre-K through 1st grade. What does the district plan to do to make sure my child has access to safe age appropriate equipment?**
 - The district is currently in the process of developing recreational areas for our younger students, which will feature amenities such as water tables, sandboxes, chalkboards, age-appropriate slides, and more. Additionally, HFIS offers a spacious soccer field and ample space for students to engage in physical activity while prioritizing safety. Our youngest students will not be allowed to engage in activities on the large jungle gym structure at HFIS.
- **Is FMES simply becoming HFIS or are the buildings going to be separated?**
 - FMES and HFIS will maintain distinct identities, including separate phone lines for secretarial and admin. Each school will have a dedicated building principal responsible for day-to-day operations. If there is interest in merging for events

such as celebrations or spirit week, decisions will be made collaboratively by the administrative team and faculty/staff from both schools.

- **I am concerned that the younger students in grades Pre-K through 2nd will have interactions with 5th and 6th graders. How does the district intend to keep the students separate?**
 - It is common for schools in the state of New York to have a Pre-Kindergarten through 6th-grade building. Many neighboring districts also have a similar grade configuration. Students will be divided into appropriate groups as much as possible for events such as Assemblies, Field Day and building-wide activities. While there may be occasions where all students come together for certain assemblies, this will be determined by the administrative team with the input and collaboration from the faculty and staff.
- **How is HFIS going to fit Pre-K through 6th grade in the building?**
 - The school district is dedicated to providing a comprehensive educational experience for our students, encompassing academic, social, and emotional growth. Pre-K and Kindergarten students will be located on the lower level at HFIS, with their own dedicated bathrooms. Students in grades 1-3 will be situated on the second floor, previously used by the middle school wing. Grades 4-5 will also be on the second floor, in the Library wing. 6th grade will be relocated to the first floor. Music and Art classes will use the push-in model, similar to the approach at Fort Montgomery School for the past five years. Band and Chorus will take place in the Auditorium, while STREAM and Library activities will be situated in the Library. The gymnasium can be partitioned to accommodate activities suitable for different age groups.
- **What does lunch/recess look like at HFIS next year?**
 - In the upcoming school year, the goal is to have Pre-Kindergarten students have lunch in their classrooms. Currently, Kindergarten through 6th-grade students will have specific designated times for lunch and will eat with their respective grade levels, while also enjoying recess together. Additional details and information will be provided by the building administration team as the summer progresses.
- **Will there be an orientation for Pre-k through 3rd grade at HFIS this summer?**
 - Yes, the building administrators for both HFIS and FMES are coordinating dates and times for these events. This will be shared with families over the summer.
- **Can you explain if this is related to the earthquake? It was confusing to see this along with the letter.**
 - The district was simultaneously planning for the repairs to the damages at HFIS while also trying to finalize for the FMES Capital Project. While these decisions don't appear to have anything to do with each other, they ultimately did. If the district was not able to put together a resolution to create a safe gymnasium at HFIS on or around the start of the 24-25 school year, the district would not have been able to close the FMES building.

