

FHS/BA co-op agreement continues, plans for committee nixed

[By MISTY SCHWAB misty.schwab@apgsomn.com](mailto:misty.schwab@apgsomn.com) July 20, 2020

Discussions surrounding the potential dissolution of a nearly four-decade cooperative athletic agreement between Faribault Public School and Bethlehem Academy have been set aside in favor of an in-depth look at why FPS students are open enrolling in other districts.

Every two years, Faribault Public Schools must renew its cooperative agreement with any schools it sponsors. In order to dissolve the co-op, the sponsor school needs to give its partner school a one-year notice following School Board approval. FHS's cooperative agreement with Bethlehem Academy dates back 37 years, and declining enrollment over the past few years at FHS sparked a discussion on whether or not to continue that agreement. In theory, the co-op agreement may promote students to open enroll elsewhere.

The district in recent years has seen a precipitous drop in enrollment, and with it, funding. The decline's a large part of why the district's had to make deep cut in its 2019-20 and 2020-21 budgets.

The Faribault School Board initially discussed the possible severance at its June 8 meeting, but instead of making decision, the administration agreed to develop a committee to advocate for improved relationships between all area schools. The purpose of the proposed committee was to detect and repair deeper issues between the co-op partners. However, during a work session Friday afternoon, the board re-evaluated the potential co-op committee and ultimately discontinued the idea.

Superintendent Todd Sesker said he's received emails from interested individuals inquiring when the co-op committee will start meeting.

During Friday's virtual meeting, he invited the School Board to consider who would develop this committee — the board or community members. Either way, Sesker said he would be involved in the process.

None of the School Board members expressed a strong favored a co-op committee but instead offered alternative ideas for answering some of their questions in regards to co-ops.

Board member Yvette Marthaler felt more structure was needed in order for the board to make a recommendation, and Board member John Bellingham felt a committee wasn't needed.

Added Board member Courtney Cavellier: "I think we need to decide whether this is the committee we're looking for. From the discussion that happened, the committee I am most interested in convening is one addressing why our community is choosing to enroll elsewhere."

Board Chair Chad Wolff said the board would discuss the possible development of an open-enrollment investigative committee during Monday's virtual School Board meeting.

Wolff relayed his understanding that senior leadership wants the co-ops "looked at, potentially changed or potentially eliminated." He himself wanted answers to the questions of why Faribault Public Schools co-ops with BA and not Shattuck-St. Mary's or Medford, where to draw the line

if more schools request partnerships, and whether or not the co-ops actually promote open enrollment.

Board member Jason Engbrecht clarified that co-ops are not the only reason for students open enrolling, and that taking a step back and looking at open enrollment as a separate issue might be a better approach to understanding its relation to co-ops.

Before the meeting, board members got Athletic Director Keith Badger's answers to 18 of their questions regarding co-ops. In the document, posted on the [Faribault Public Schools website](#), Badger said, "I can't speculate whether or not co-op sports promote open enrollment and I don't have any data to show for that. I would say that as long as the co-op does not bump us up a class, then yes, we would be willing to co-op because we have done this with other schools."

Furthermore, Badger wrote that while the administration and leadership teams have discussed the pros and cons of ending the co-op agreement, no one has made a recommendation to the School Board. If faced with that decision, the board would need to reach a consensus based on facts and information provided.

Said Sesker: "We want to be on the right side of the decision and don't know how to do that without providing all seven board members with data ... Jamie [Bente, FHS principal] and I have been trying to give as much information as we can possibly give. We're going to support either direction the board would go on this but would prefer to first give the best possible data."

Reporter Misty Schwab can be reached at 507-333-3135. Follow her on Twitter [@APGmisty](#).
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