

01/19/05 - Posted from the Daily Record newsroom

Board OKs arts academy move Program to be housed at Denville vo-tech site

By Laura Bruno, Daily Record

DENVILLE -- Beginning in September, the Academy for Visual and Performing Arts will be housed at the Morris County School of Technology in Denville.

Despite parent and student objections that the move from its current location at Boonton High School will be disruptive and jeopardizes the program, the school board approved the change.

Three of the board's five members voted Tuesday night against renewing the contract with Boonton High School, which expires June 30. Absent for the vote were members Barbara Dawson and Thomas Kane, Morris County Superintendent of Schools.

"We feel this is the right move to make" said Kathleen Hyland, board president. "In the long run, students coming here are going to prosper and do very well."

Two dozen parents and students disagreed with the board, with some warning that the move could result in a lower enrollment for the academy next year.

"I've heard parents say they will probably pull their children out if it moves," said David Landau, a Florham Park parent who ran a theater for 20 years and currently teaches visual and performing arts at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

Landau countered the board's contention that the facilities in Denville will be adequate for the program. As part of a \$15.1 million construction project under way in Denville, two multi-purpose rooms will be changed into a dance studio and theater class. However, there will not be an auditorium to stage large-scale productions.

"It is essential to perform on a stage; you cannot perform in a gym used as an auditorium," Landau said. "The acoustics are horrible."

Landau said the construction changes in Denville will never match what was constructed in Boonton.

"Taking a space that was not designed for dance and theater classes and forcing it into that is a far cry from spaces that were originally designed for those purposes," Landau said. "It is a great step down."

Roughly \$700,000 in state and county funding was spent to renovate Boonton High School five years ago to accommodate the academy. The county's share of the cost totaled about \$420,000. The construction changes in the Denville project will cost about

\$300,000 to \$350,000, but will be covered by contingency funds built into the project's total cost, said Scott Moffitt, business administrator.

Several parents said they were disappointed the board did not consult them before making such a decision. Students and parents were told of the move four days before the board planned to vote on the change.

"I find it unfortunate that meetings were held behind closed doors," said John Natali of Lincoln Park. "It seems sudden to be making this move without all the impacts being considered.

Sophomore Amanda Treweeke agreed.

"I think they need to put themselves in our shoes," Treweeke said. "We're supposed to be benefiting from the move, but we're not."

Parents said they were told their children would attend Boonton High School for four years. As a result, students have taken part in Boonton's sports and after-school activities. Current juniors could lose their ability to continue on those teams next year as seniors, giving up the chance to be team captains.

Denville mother Ellen Nowicky said the board should consider a phased-out approach so that students who are juniors this year can enjoy typical senior year rites of passage, such as a prom, next year in Boonton.

"The students are fully integrated in Boonton High School and it would be a shame to take that away from them," said Nowicky, whose daughter is on Boonton's swim team.

Hyland said they are working to see that seniors can participate on Boonton's teams and attend the prom and graduation, but did not have those answers yet. The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association will decide whether students can finish their senior year on Boonton sports teams.

Hyland added that they did not take the move lightly and asked school administrators the same questions parents were posing before coming to their decision. However, school officials admitted they did not consider moving either of the two other satellite academies located at Morris Hills and Butler high schools.

They began to talk of moving from Boonton in part because of two problems at the high school. A social studies class is being held in a multimedia classroom due to a space crunch and at times the dance and theater classes have to vacate the auditorium when it is needed for Boonton's programs, Superintendent James Rogers said.

Rogers said relocating to Denville also will allow several of the career academies in Denville to interact. The school opened four full-time high school career academies last

September that meld academics with vocational training. Three more are slated to open this fall. Previously, the school offered only half-day vocational classes.

Students in construction arts could work on theater set designs, cosmetology students could collaborate on theater make-up and advertising art design could prepare promotional materials for productions, Rogers said.

The move also means that roughly \$433,000 spent on tuition for Boonton to house the academy's 71 students now can be spent at the Denville campus.

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