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HOT

At Sherando — Frederick County's most overcrowded school — modular classrooms are a campus fixture

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star
Mar 12, 2024

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Sherando High School students walk to and from the 16 classrooms behind the school during a class change. At 1:00 p.m., Sherando is Frederick County's most overcrowded school.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

STEPHENS CITY — It's a Friday afternoon at Sherando High School, and Laura Kovak's 10th-grade English students are filing into a modular classroom behind the school's main building.

It's a fairly large space, with fluorescent lighting overhead and desks set up in neat rows. The walls are covered with colorful tapestries, posters of cartoon characters and motivational quotes. One of the windows peers directly into another modular classroom positioned a few feet away.

This was one of the first modulares at Sherando, Kovak said.

It's her first year teaching in a modular. She was unsure at first, but Kovak says she doesn't mind it.

"I love it out here," she said. "... It's just because I can just come here, I'm with my kids and my work and it's just peaceful and quiet."

But many county and school officials, along with constituents and parents, aren't fans of these modular classrooms. And for those pushing for a fourth high school in Frederick County, these structures have almost become a rallying cry.

At 123% capacity with approximately 1,670 students, Sherando is the division's most overcrowded school.

Sherando Principal Karen McCoy wrote in an email to The Winchester Star that the modular classrooms have varying daily impacts on the school.

"Teachers have to be flexible in their teaching, as it takes longer for a student to go into the [main] building from a trailer than from an internal classroom, thus it requires peer and teacher support for students from the time they missed," McCoy wrote.

Sherando currently has six structures containing 16 classrooms that are detached from the main building. The oldest one is about 20 years old, McCoy said.

She explained the school adopted a "supervisory station" to monitor the doors between the modulares and main building so students can access the main building — one of many additional roles for staff due to overcrowding.

Some teachers have to arrive early to handle the volume of students who begin arriving at 7 a.m., and some bus drivers run triple routes. Classes sometimes have 30 students, which McCoy wrote can often lead to a workload equivalent of teaching an extra section. And some teachers, she said, actually do have to take on extra sections to accommodate the building's master schedule.

"We are fortunate to have had staff who have willingly volunteered to take on this extra responsibility, but we are always [wanting] to be careful to not overload staff as their well-being is incredibly important," McCoy wrote.

Former Sherando principal John Nelson, who retired last summer after working at the school since its doors opened in 1993, said he watched as these issues persisted throughout his tenure. He witnessed nearly two decades of conversations about addressing the overcrowding, with a fourth high school first appearing on the division's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) in 2005.

Nelson believes a fourth high school should have been built years ago. Overcrowding places stress on the schools, he said, and the county's population isn't expected to stop growing any time soon. The Winchester metro area was recently named the fastest -growing metro area in Virginia for the second year in a row.

"It's been very frustrating. The talk of a fourth high school has been discussed with both the Board of Supervisors and the School Board for at least 10 or 12 years, maybe a little bit longer," Nelson said. "And the Board of Supervisors just keeps kicking the can down the road and refuses to support a fourth high school."

In 2012, the Board of Supervisors allocated money toward design and engineering work for a fourth high school. In 2013, the division purchased 83 acres east of Admiral Byrd Middle School for \$2 million, which was and still is intended as the site for a new high school. In 2017, the Board of Supervisors denied funding for the project, balking at a cost that was estimated at the time at \$91.4 million. Nelson was there for all of it.

"So they bought the land, so the land's there. Then they gave the School Board permission to design a fourth high school. All that takes money. And ... when they refuse to fund the building of the high school, all that design, prep and money that went into it is now lost," Nelson said.

The 16 modular classrooms are also concerning to Nelson. First and foremost, he feels they pose a safety issue, saying students and staff are "safer behind brick and mortar" compared to the "thinly walled" modular classrooms.

Frederick County Public Schools Superintendent George Hummer says modular classrooms are ideally only designed as temporary fixes, agreeing they present security issues.

"Now, do we continue to make sure that they are safe? Absolutely," he said. "Do we partner with our local sheriff's office to make sure that we have the structures in place to keep those students safe out in those structures? Absolutely. But it does definitely add additional variables that we have to

make sure that we stay on top of which again, decreases our ability to make sure that we're staying 100% safe, and that's something that we don't like and we want to make sure that the public knows that."

Sherando parent Devon Stein said she has family members who survived the 2017 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where access to classrooms proved to be a huge safety risk.

Stein also said the modulars at Sherando appear to pose logistical challenges, noting the distance to the bathrooms in the main building and how there is not always enough time for students to make it to their next class before the bell rings.

"And the trailer park out back just keeps growing," she said.

Debbie Miles, the mother of two current and one former Sherando students, doesn't think Sherando should have to wait for an emergency situation before overcrowding is addressed.

County officials have also expressed their displeasure about the number of modulars at Sherando. Frederick County Board of Supervisor Blaine Dunn has consistently said it's unacceptable to have the structures on campus for so long. Stonewall School Board representative Linda Martin recently called the modulars "a stigma on our county."

If the division does not address its overcrowding, though, Hummer said modular classrooms could ultimately become permanent fixtures on FCPS campuses. The older ones will also begin to require maintenance, which would cost the division money.

Beyond the trailers, Nelson and McCoy both said overcrowding impacts Sherando's ability to best serve its students, as larger class sizes mean less feedback and individualized attention. It can also impact the students' mental health, they said, from an inflated school counselor caseload to the overall anxiety that can come from being in a large crowd or loud environment. McCoy also noted that few Sherando students use their lockers because they become virtually inaccessible due to busy hallways.

Fewer opportunities in the classroom is also an issue, according to McCoy. Stein shared that her 8th-grade daughter has already been told she may not be able to take her preferred elective courses due to overcrowding.

Chantal Phillips, an FCPS parent and substitute school nurse who, on occasion, worked at Sherando last year, said that more students means less time to focus on the unique needs of each child. It's hard to properly address what's going on with a kid who has, say, a language barrier or a complex emotional need when there's a line of 20 kids waiting in the clinic.

"Public school, it's the representation, right?" Phillips said. "... Like, reach every kid at their level to bring out the best for all of them. And especially for those kids that aren't going to get it at home. How are you going to do that? ... I feel like public education, we do owe that."

The cost of a new school facility appears to be the project's biggest barrier, and that number is only getting bigger. The estimated price tag has grown from \$91.4 million in 2017 to \$152.3 million.

Hummer describes himself as an optimistic person. His proposals, he says, are data-driven and based on the division's needs. A fourth high school is one of the priorities in Capital Improvement Plan approved by the School Board in December and forwarded to the Board of Supervisors. He said that requesting a fourth high school wasn't done just because it's been on the docket for a long time, but because he's seen the need during his first year as superintendent. McCoy also expressed optimism about the situation, saying she is hopeful for a fourth high school.

Some people, like Miles, say they aren't so sure.

"I haven't yet seen the behavior on the school board level that would give me faith that the people who are in charge across the board, that we have enough adults in the room to move forward what we need to move forward," she said. "And I would really like to see that behavior."

The Board of Supervisors has yet to consider funding for a fourth high school in this iteration, or the other two priorities the School Board voted on in December: an expansion at either Armel or Middletown elementary schools and an expansion at Jordan Springs Elementary School. A fourth high school would likely take about four years to construct.

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