

# Finding sweet spot on high schools requires flexibility, practicality

## Vigo County has weathered several changes throughout the years

It seemed like a dramatic moment.

Instead, the summer of 1971's opening of a 60-year-old time capsule proved to be more of a reality check.

Garfield High School's final principal, Bradley Lorton, chiseled open a metal box placed inside the cornerstone 60 years earlier. The 1970-71 school year was Garfield's last. The building's demolition loomed. Garfield and rival Gerstmeyer high schools were closing, and would consolidate into Terre Haute North Vigo High School

in the fall of 1971.

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School pride: Pennants for Honey Creek,

Wiley, Garfield and Gerstmeyer hang alongside those from other bygone Vigo County high schools inside the Educational Heritage Association Museum on Lafayette Avenue. Consolidation merged those four schools into Terre Haute North and South in the fall of 1971.

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in 2006. And, a nasty streetcar collision in 1908 left northside parents worried about the safety of teens riding those vehicles

can help the community make more informed decisions this time. Haworth, the VCSC superintendent, is

Across the county, Honey Creek and Wiley high schools were also closing to form the new Terre Haute South Vigo High. So, the opening of Garfield's time capsule, dating back to its construction in 1911 and opening in 1912, offered a bit of mystery and nostalgia. Would it contain notes from the first students? A letter sweater? A Garfield ink pen? Nope. Principal Lorton cracked the seal and found newspaper clippings about "the court battles" over the school's formation six decades earlier, according to the 1971 edition of Garfield's "Benedictus" yearbook. That wasn't all. The principal also found petitions and school board minutes from that contentious situation.

That's what early- 20th-century Hauteans left for future generations to consider.

Change to school configurations never comes smoothly, whether it's 1911, 1961, 1971 or 2021. It's worthwhile to keep that certainty in

to Wiley. They organized. The "Northside Committee" advocated for a new high school.

Thus, Garfield was built near 12th Street and Maple Avenue, and former Wiley students living on the north end had their own school by fall of 1912. The plan led to lots of friction, though.

It took the election of new school board members, backed by the Northside Committee, and a petition with more than 6,000 signatures to get the board to support the new school and allot \$23,000 for the land. Other residents opposing the idea filed multiple lawsuits, Garfield's "Benedictus" yearbook states. The Northside Committee thought the original contractor purposely delayed its work and pressed the school board to hire a different company.

Viewed with more than a century of hindsight, the need for a north-end school in 1912 — and the value of Garfield's 59

consulting with the Vigo County Educational Heritage Association Museum crew — a team of retired teachers — about the bygone schools' histories in preparation for community forums.

"Celebrating where we have been as a school corporation isn't just about celebrating those good memories. It is important to understand that high schools are renewed generationally," Haworth said Wednesday.

"No matter what the community tells us they want done in a potential high school building project, this project will be supported by a community who, one or two generations ago, provided for them," Haworth added. "Thinking about where we have been as a school corporation helps us think about a community's schools as a common good, and one provided by the generations that came before."

A small group of members of the Class of '71 from Garfield, Gerstmeyer,

perspective as the Vigo County School Corp. continues to access the future of its three high schools — North, South and West Vigo.

A series of community meetings, including eight last month, as well as an online ideas forum “Thought Exchange,” offer multiple opportunities for the public to weigh in on whether to renovate or rebuild those aging structures, and how best to modernize them to meet 21st-century students’ needs.

Eight options are being considered, or a different alternative could emerge. The current choices include consolidating the three high schools into one or two, keeping three, or splitting into four. Expanding the number of high schools isn’t unheard-of for a local school district. Surprisingly, nine Indiana school districts have more high schools now than in 2010-11, according to Indiana’s Department of Education.

years of service — seems obvious now.

So does the concept of a single, countywide school district.

But in 1960, Vigo County had nine township systems, two reorganized school districts and the Terre Haute public school system. A year earlier, the Indiana General Assembly triggered a wave of consolidations by mandating each county to assess their educational systems and reorganize more efficiently.

The eventual 1961 consolidation of more than a dozen Vigo County public high schools into five — Honey Creek, Wiley, Garfield, Gerstmeyer and West Vigo — was preceded by “more than a year of planning, hearings and bitter debate,” as a 2016 retrospective by the Tribune-Star’s Sue Loughlin explained.

City-versus-county debates ensued. Rural communities feared losing their identities.

Honey Creek and Wiley — interviewed for a Valley Life feature on that unique final year (See today’s Page C1) — gave their perspective on the present decision. All preferred smaller high schools, rather than one or two large structures. Teachers knew their students better, and fewer kids “fell through the cracks.”

“When you get bigger, you lose some of the opportunities to get closer to people,” said Cathy Allen, a 1971 Gerstmeyer grad.

Still, they acknowledged that cost matters, when it comes to restoring or replacing schools — 50 years ago and now.

Other realities matter, too. Jim Jeffers, a ‘71 Wiley grad, pointed out that his alma mater had some large class sizes then.

Indeed, the baby boom swelled enrollments in Vigo County’s old high schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In its final year, Wiley had

Various strategies for renovating North, South and West Vigo are also on the table. Of course, the cost, tax rates and shelf-life of the chosen option must also be considered.

The in-person and online outlets for public input, set up by Superintendent Rob Haworth and the VCSC staff, should give the process transparency and help clarify the wisest option, in the minds of the community. Haworth could present a final choice to the School Board next January. If approved, voters would get the final say through a referendum on the May 2022 primary ballot.

No matter what, the end result won't please everybody.

In the 20th century's first decade, Terre Haute's lone public high school — Wiley, located downtown — had become overcrowded, according to historian Mike McCormick's account

Consolidation proponents cited the lack of equitable facilities and resources among the schools. Nearly one-third of Indiana high schools had fewer than 100 students. The Indiana Chamber of Commerce distributed leaflets pointing out the tiniest schools couldn't offer kids high-level courses without "unreasonably high costs."

Voters approved the plan to reorganize Vigo County schools into one district by a 14,636 to 12,478 margin in November 1960. City residents overwhelmingly favored it. Two-thirds of the townships opposed it.

The following decade involved more of those debates, leading up to the consolidations into North and South in 1971. Cost-cutting choices made then affected those schools for decades afterward.

Remembering those experiences, as well as the legacies of the past schools,

1,100 students in an 85-year-old building, including more than 300 seniors. Honey Creek's enrollment hit a record 875 students in '71, according to its "Spirit" yearbook. And, yearbooks reported Garfield graduated more than 320 seniors in '71 and Gerstmeyer more than 340.

This year's senior classes at North and South top 370 students.

So, what should guide Vigo Countians' final choice on the high schools, given the past?

Kym (Martin) Marco of Gerstmeyer's final class recommended "whatever environment provides the students ample opportunity for choices. Somewhere there's a balance. If a school's too small, it's stifling. If it's too large, they get lost. There's something in between."

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