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City schools have too much space

By Kristen A. Graham

Inquirer Staff Writer

The Philadelphia School District has tens of thousands more seats than students, and the empty space will only grow in years to come.

The district has 43,500 more seats than students, and it could have as many as 61,000 in five years. The surplus affects all grades.

More than a dozen district schools use fewer than 50 percent of their available seats, officials said. The district counts school capacity by measuring the maximum number of students that can be educated in a building.

Still, some neighborhoods - particularly those in the east region, including the areas of Mayfair, Kensington, Fishtown, Port Richmond, Bridesburg, Frankford and Juniata Park - remain overcrowded, even with some students bused to schools elsewhere in the city.

"We have a paradox of overcapacity and overcrowding at the same time," said Michael Masch, the district's chief business officer.

Officials said they would consult with communities that might be affected before arriving at any formula for change. There is no timetable for when school closings or other plans might be put into place.

Citywide, there are about 167,000 students enrolled in district-are about 200,000 public school students in Philadelphia.

A consultant recommended yesterday that the district consolidate programs, close buildings, or change the way buildings are used. Changing enrollment requirements also was mentioned as a possibility. Athenian Properties L.L.C. presented the information at yesterday's School Reform Commission meeting.

Even if the district halved its 45 percent dropout rate, doubled the number of children in early-childhood programs, lowered class size 10 percent, and added many more charter schools, the seat surplus still would grow, according to the consultant's report.

Athenian suggested that the surplus gave the district a chance to "spend less money on real estate and more money on education."

The district's facilities puzzle is a complex one. The typical Philadelphia public school is 70 years old, and for many years little was spent on capital projects. But under the Paul Vallas administration of the early- to-mid-2000s, the district began investing in building projects, converting many elementary schools to K-8 buildings and changing middle schools into small high schools. The Vallas-era capital plan expires this year.

Masch said the administration was working on a "right-sizing" policy.

He said that more than a dozen schools in the city were at less than 50 percent capacity. That means, he said, that "we will be spending money to heat and light and staff buildings that are severely underpopulated."

Commission Chairwoman Sandra Dungee Glenn said that in making decisions about how to address the overcapacity problem, the panel must weigh factors such as whether children should be able to walk to school or how long they should be on a bus.

Glenn said that overcrowding in some areas and undercrowding in others was likely to influence future decisions the commission made, such as whether to approve charter schools.

Rather than just closing buildings, the district could house multiple programs in a single structure - a practice common in New York City public schools, Glenn said. This already is happening in Philadelphia: the old Sulzberger Middle School is now home to a Middle Years Alternative program and the Parkway West High School program.

The district is likely to revisit the capacity issue every school year going forward, Masch said.

Yesterday's meeting could be the last official gathering for some commission members. Four of the five members' terms are up Sunday, and with no official word from either the mayor's or governor's offices - each is responsible for two appointments this year - it is unclear what the panel will look like going forward.

U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah (D., Pa.), a Glenn ally, said he believed she would be reappointed to the commission and remain as chair.

"I assume she will be leading the district as she has," Fattah said.

Also up are the terms of Commissioners James Gallagher, Heidi Ramirez and Martin Bednarek. Gallagher is widely expected to leave the commission.