

**COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS – FOCUSED CONVERSATION ABOUT
HELENA PUBIC SCHOOLS FACILITIES
AND THE EDUCATIONAL GOALS THEY SUPPORT**

November 12, 2015

Session Summary

CONVERSATION OBJECTIVES

- Re-engage community members in thinking about the District's facilities and the educational goals they support.
- Establish a productive conversation climate regardless of points of view.
- Provide the community with some context for discussion.
- Collect information from community members that will help inform the School District in moving forward in facility planning.
- Explain what happens to tonight's input and encourage community interest and engagement as the process goes forward.

COMPLETED AGENDA ITEMS

Introduction to the Session

Welcome from the Superintendent

Superintendent Kent Kultgen welcomed the 42 people at the session and explained that he would like to re-start the conversation with the community about facilities and how they support educational goals. He referred the group to information attached to the agenda that provided demographic data and a map showing the location of Helena Public Schools. Superintendent Kultgen explained that he and the Board of Trustees are hoping for an open, collaborative process with the community and that only 3 steps have been defined at this point as follows:

- Recent conversation with City and County elected officials;
- Six community and 2 staff facilitated listening sessions (taking place this week and the 2nd week of December);
- A statistically valid survey in January 2016 to affirm what was heard in the listening sessions and help determine next steps.

The Superintendent thanked people for coming and turned the meeting over to the facilitator.

Role of the Facilitator, etc.

The facilitator explained her role as process manager for the listening sessions and stated the objectives for the evening. She asked those in attendance to honor the following conversation ground rules to encourage productive and civil conversation in the meeting:

- Be open and candid – but without a “blunt instrument”.
- Respect that others have different points of view; to learn – keep an open mind.
- Manage your own communication – contribute to the productivity of the conversation.
- Recognize realities – individually and collectively.

She also pointed out the presence of Board members in the group and asked if they might be participants as long as they followed the ground rules. The group was comfortable with Board member participation.

“Important Questions”

The facilitator explained that she was using a discussion tool called “Important Questions” to focus the conversation and that all participant responses would be recorded. The questions and participant responses are as follows.

“Warm up” – Why did you come to the meeting?

- I wanted to listen to a different point of view here in the valley.
- Our community is both the downtown and the valley – the 8000 plus students. I want to see us move forward as a community.
- I was active in the past process - and want to throw my hat back in the ring – see how to start over.
- I want to get an idea of everyone’s thoughts after the failure of the bond and think about going forward.
- I need to speak up – to make sure Montessori is still in the plan – even to expand it.
- I’m a parent here at Jim Darcy and teach in town. I want everyone to know that the need is everywhere.

What guiding principles are important to you as we talk about facilities and educational goals?

We believe:

- That students come first and that decisions should be made with students’ best interests in mind.
- In pride in public education from start to finish – Pre-kindergarten through graduation.
- In providing free and appropriate educational opportunity to all.
- In one school district.
- In being fiscally responsible but thinking and problem-solving creatively.
- In being geographically responsible.
- In applying common sense.
- That children and staff deserve adequate space and a safe environment.
- In identifying needs versus wants.
- That students need many different learning environments.
- That District facilities should allow for varied and flexible spaces.
- That emotional attachment to facilities and buildings in part of community culture.
- That some facilities can be rebuilt/repurposed versus starting from scratch.
- In area repair – not all at once.
- That one size doesn’t fit all.
- In walkability and keeping downtown strong.
- That poor education equals poor community. Good education is good community.
- That groups of influence and governing bodies need to be active partners and that compromise will be necessary.
- That information sharing and clear messaging is critical to success in this process.
- In long-term planning for facilities.

What “interests” need to be recognized as the District plans for facilities improvement?

- It’s in the interest of academic achievement to have up-to-date facilities including science labs, technology, common areas, play areas, gymnasiums, libraries, etc.
- It’s in the interest of the overall community to rebuild trust with the District.
- It’s in the interest of “community” to have adequate facilities including:
 - Helena as a whole
 - Each little school
 - “Centers” of children/activities
 - Each school local to a part of the valley (i.e., Jim Darcy)
 - “Home schools” – Those in a “neighborhood” within walking distance – a “hub” for a “neighborhood”
- It’s in the interest of parents to keep it relevant.
- It’s in the interest of the District and the community to:
 - Engage staff and administration
 - Listen to and respect their input
 - Treat them as vested and real experts with education interests.
 - It’s in the interest of the School District to look at all students’ needs and interests.
- It’s in the interest of the School District to focus on:
 - Defining the root causes of why the bond failed
 - Having/offering a clear message... clear communication to mend the root causes.
- It’s in the District’s interest to prioritize and start small.
- It’s in the interest of the District to solve Jim Darcy problems now/meet the acute issues now by;
 - Looking at creative financing options (i.e., lease with option to purchase, etc.).
 - Having a contractor construct/build for the District to lease/buy back over time.
- It’s in the interest all students to have access to differentiated learning.
- It’s in the interest of the public to know what 21st century schools/education looks like.
- It’s in the interest of health and safety to have a safe, warm, healthy environment that is conducive to learning and includes meals.

What do you not want to lose when planning for improved facilities?

- Academics
- Familiar area for school, community and activities for kids and families; schools used by the community for other activities because it connects the school back to the community and maintains the familiarity for children.
- Student to teacher ratio with smaller class ratio in mind because:
 - It doesn’t stretch standards in classroom size
 - It keeps consistency across schools in programs
 - It treats all schools with the same value
 - It maintains individuality of each school.
- Valuing all students, all schools because it is not us versus them.
- Valuing the system of the schools but maintaining the individuality of each school
- Adequate spaces for families to watch and participate in school functions

What do you not want to lose when planning for improved facilities? – cont.

- Adequate space for children in their area
- Families' connections to their school because there is diversity in Helena that we want to maintain (How to keep focus on this, keep in mind, keep voices heard?)
- 8000 plus students
- Focus on the big picture involving elementary, middle and high schools
- Opportunities/access to arts and sports
- Attention to where all kids are living/residing
- A timeline and plan that determines stages; helps develop community consensus
- An ongoing conversation and momentum
- Taxpayer perspective – What it will cost and what will be the benefits?
- Community involvement because the public gets confused without connection and communications with parents, taxpayers, etc.
- Our great Helena teachers due to environment and losing them to school district around Helena that are improving and passing bonds
- Quality of teachers
- Don't want to get left behind by other districts

What do you want to gain when planning for facilities improvement?

- Optimal teacher/student ratio
- One building rather than pieces to make collaboration better, improve teamwork among staff and for the comfort of children
- Kids can go to school in their area
- Montessori opportunities at all schools
- Children's' safety (buildings up to code, better drop off/pick up areas, etc.)
- Make school part of the community again so everyone has an interest in it
- Schools used by communities for meetings, events, etc.
- Reduce the "carbon footprint" and costs to the schools
- Full time nurses to cover the needs of all children; specialist such as counselors
- Counselors at the same school with no yearly rotation
- Separate areas to fulfill the needs of gyms vs cafeteria vs community events
- More flexible learning environments (room to do group learning and one-on-one teaching)
- Up-to-date technology and devices used in the classroom
- An environment that encourages all parents to be more involved
- Ability to address the emotional needs of children
- Meet all the needs of children

How would you describe a useful process that engages the community?

- Show people you listened. Get back to the community to demonstrate that you listened.
- Set goals and criteria for decision making. Have the community involved in setting them.
- Continue listening. Use all kinds of tools to ask, listen and inform so you connect with people who don't attend these listening sessions.
- Create involvement among "voters" by presenting this as something of value to them... to different interests who will be affected.