

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

November 10, 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 26 staff members at the session and explained that he would like to re-start the conversation about facilities and how they support educational goals. He referred 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 staff 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 came to listen to other staff members
- I came because I think we are embarrassed about our facilities and we need to show pride in them.
- If I have an opinion, I should show up rather than talk about it outside this discussion.
- I want to be able to support/defend the reasons we need to pass a bond.
- I want to feel more comfortable about the fidelity of the process.

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

We believe:

- That facilities should reflect the community’s commitment to our children’s education
- In ongoing, sustainable facilities planning to allow for an evolving world.
- That every child deserves a school environment that promotes safety and wellness.
- That a school/schools can be focal points in the community.
- That location matters.
- That, in order to be a successful district, we need open, all-inclusive communication.

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

- It’s in the community’s interest to have its schools reflect its values about education..
- It’s in the interest of teachers to have access to resources to properly educate students.
- It’s in the interest of student and staff to be functional in terms of size of schools (currently too many in some and not enough in others; size of C.R. Anderson)
- It’s in the interest of the District to have guidelines as to size of classes and schools.
- It’s in the interest of students to have more flexible and innovative spaces for learning.
- It’s in the interest of M.B.C. to have staff involved in listening sessions.
- It’s in the interest of students to have access to facilities appropriate to learning in a modern age (i.e., wiring, wifi, etc.).
- It’s in the interest of schools to have areas for “meltdowns”, privacy, small groups, etc.
- It’s in the interest of families and students to have schools serve as safe community space even after school hours.
- It’s in the interest of teachers and other staff to have improved working conditions.
- It’s in the interest of students to have arts, music, and physical education maintained.
- It’s in the interest of student to have adequate eating facilities and reasonable eating times of the day.
- Walkability is in the community’s interest.
- It’s in the community’s interest to maintain historical parts of the city (i.e., Central).
- It’s in the interest of taxpayers to have their lives be affordable.
- It’s in the interest of the District to start improving facilities even if with just one school.
- It’s in our interest to have open, transparent discussion between staff and central office.

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

- Quality of staff and quality of programs
- Field at Smith
- Counseling and arts
- Activities
- Community support
- Sense of pride
- Personal contact
- Walkability
- Students and families
- Angel Fund
- Title I programs
- CSCT services (mental health services within buildings)

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

- More equity in classroom size (number of students)
- More safety on playgrounds
- More teaching space
- Neighborhood schools for every child
- More contained libraries
- More resources
- In some cases, a fence
- Correct fixes, not band aids
- One campus school
- Parking
- Healthy meals in separate cafeterias
- Room for community programs; appropriate space for all programs even bathrooms
- HVAC/ventilation
- Safe entry ways

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

- Have the Superintendent lead “safe” listening sessions/conversation with all staff at all schools at the beginning and throughout this process. Create opportunities for ongoing communication between/among staff and central office.
- Create opportunities for communication between staff and the public.
- Try to involve more District school staff whenever possible.
- Use a facilitator when the “going gets rough”.
- Do “an autopsy” on the last failed bond process and learn lessons from it.
- Develop and implement thoughtful and transparent strategies to rebuild trust with the community. Demonstrate trustworthiness.
- Approach the new process in a way that discourages “us vs them”.
- Develop a timeline and use input to get the parts of a plan in place; communicate them.
- Consider presenting options to the community – perhaps as a way to start to analyze and think about bond intent and language.