

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

December 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 participants to 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. The Superintendent explained that he and the School Board are hoping for an open, collaborative process with the community and that only these 3 steps have been defined at this point:

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

The Superintendent thanked those in attendance 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 asked participants to honor the following discussion 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 follow the ground rules. The group agreed and encouraged their 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. Those questions and participant responses are as follows.

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

We believe:

- That human beings are more than scientists and mathematicians. They are logical, imaginative, emotional and embodied.
- That students are more than a test score.
- That parents/families need to bring children to school who are ready to learn.
- That schools need to be large enough to provide a safe environment for students attending that school.
- That facilities should be designed to foster learning.
- That schools need to be adaptive to meet student needs.
- There should be support and facilities for students with high level needs (SPED).
- That schools need to be safe and secure.
- That Essentials are essential (library, music, physical education, recess, arts, etc.).
- That physical education can make students more intelligent, improve memory and focus and improve mental well-being. (Per Spark, Dr. Ratey).
- That Montessori education needs to be part of our community’s schools.
- That it is a struggle for teachers to effectively teach in the current facilities.
- That facilities decisions should be about the needs of kids – not the needs of grownups.
- That schools are more than academics – they are community hubs.
- That “community” schools are important and that schools need to be close-knit communities.
- That students deserve to be in safe and healthy environments to learn.
- In the importance of a long-term plan for facilities and that the community needs a clear, long range plan in order to support facilities improvement.
- That the community needs to know that the District will be financially stable.
- That ongoing maintenance of facilities should be a priority.
- That modular buildings are not the answer.
- In balancing the needs of the community as a whole.
- That some guiding principles will sometimes be in conflict with other guiding principles – but that they should continue to help frame the decision space.
- That trust needs to be rebuilt between the community and the District.
- That without community support, education, and understanding, no bond can be successful.

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

- It’s in the interest of students that facilities meet safety, education, and space needs.
- It’s in the interest of students and the District to meet population, demographic and other future needs.
- It’s in the interest of students and teachers to have adequate space to fulfill both of their needs.
- It’s in the interest of
- It’s in the interest of the larger Helena community to have all decisions clear and that decisions be based on solid data that is transparent.
- It’s in the interest of taxpayers that the District be financially responsible.
- It’s in the interest of the City of Helena to have it recognized that our taxes come from city homes and buildings.
- It’s in the interest of the city of Helena to keep schools in the city.
- It’s in the interest of students of Helena – both city and valley – to have great facilities and teachers.
- It’s in the interest of our sanity to stick to a well-thought out, data-backed plan that is transparent and acknowledge that “it won’t please everyone”.

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

- Safe and secure schools
- More transparency in funding
- Technology space
- Accessibility
- Buildings that don’t hold our kids back
- Community supported vision
- More space
- Individualized learning spaces
- Ability to transition to early childhood education
- Better utilization of space
- Open enrollment
- More Montessori
- More STEM opportunities
- Innovative/collaborative learning
- Less common core – don’t teach to the tests
- Access to reliable technology for every child
- Access to technology for families at their children’s’ schools
- Conflict between neighborhood schools and larger facilities addressed successfully

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

- Why we are doing this – for kids
- Neighborhood schools
- High quality education
- Walkability
- Community feel within schools
- School as community center concept
- Community support and engagement
- Montessori education

How would you describe a useful process that engages the community? What would success look like in the end?

- Data is available/compare data to other communities
- Large electronic survey; promote survey results to organizations
- Bond based on data and prioritized need
- Wide variety of media
- Know the needs of all buildings
- Clear criteria for assessing facilities
- Prioritize and advertise the needs of all schools
- Develop ownership by leadership
- Clearly compare proposals
- Educate all voters
- Put the bond into a bigger picture – a comprehensive plan for all schools
- Have a clear timeline within the plan and for the process
- Virtual tours of schools – look at deficient areas with parents and student talking
- Find community voices to carry the message; community leadership teams (i.e., see Missoula example) to develop a process and promote
- Compromise between contemporary and nostalgic
- If you voted “no”, what would it take for “yes”? Which demographic voted “no”?
- Our facilities reflect our values of education
- It appears that educators voices matter
- Facilities are safe
- Effective, spacious learning environments are in place
- In the end, success unites the community

What do people need to know to be informed voters?

- What’s the end result? Consistent answers and information
- Not “wishy-washy” language - straight facts
- What really happens in schools today? What kids need today to be successful?
- What will kids need in the future to be successful?
- Facilities inventory
- How facilities improvement can benefit the whole community
- Realistic limits of funding
- What could be possible in our community in terms of a community vision/plan?
- How can a bond tailored to the true needs of the community?