



Marinette School District Community Conversations: Summary of Comments

January 16, 2020

Background and process

Since May 2019, the Marinette School District has studied how to address the declining financial forecasts caused by declining enrollment.

A facilities study completed in May 2019 and two enrollment studies indicate that the Marinette School District will face a steady decline in enrollment. Enrollment has a direct impact on how much revenue the district receives to operate its schools, which is regulated according to a state-developed revenue limit. Currently the district operates four elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. One solution under investigation is to economize on operational costs by reducing the number of buildings operated by the district.

The facilities study, conducted by Somerville Architects, indicated:

- Most facilities are under-capacity (the district operates too much space), with the exception of Sunrise, which is over-capacity.
- All facilities require updates and maintenance.

Concurrently with gathering facilities data, two separate organizations were engaged to study enrollment projections. The first enrollment study was conducted by ENPRO Enrollment Projections. A more detailed analysis was conducted by Applied Population Lab, UW-Madison. Both studies validate that the district will experience a slow, steady decline in enrollment for the next several years.

Superintendent's Advisory Committee

In an effort to be proactive and financially responsible, the Marinette School District began evaluating how to reduce the number of schools it operates. In June and July, the district administrator met with a cross-representative group of community members. This team reviewed various financial, facility and enrollment data. After analysis of the data, including a review of several building options to reduce the number of buildings operated by the district, the community advisory group advised the superintendent to further evaluate a proposal to close three elementary schools. This is called the "three-building option".

The three-building option proposed that the district operate one elementary school at Park, the Middle School and the High School. This option requires some grade reconfiguration, too, especially moving 4th grade to the middle school and 8th grade to the high school, and remodeling/additions to Park.

Recognizing that this would be a significant change in the district, the three-building option was presented to groups of staff and community members who voluntarily attended one of five Community Conversations held in September and October 2019. The purpose of Community Conversations was to gather broader feedback about the option.

Findings from Community Conversations

What both Staff and Community groups had in common:

All Community Conversations began with a presentation of facts and information about the facilities study, enrollment, and the pros and cons of a three-building option. After the informational portion of the meeting, the participants were asked to move into small groups. At facilitated table discussions, the groups were asked to answer three questions as follows:

Thinking about the 3-building configuration recommendation:

1. What are the potential benefits that the Board needs to address in its final recommendation?
2. What are the potential concerns that the Board needs to address in its final recommendation?
3. In general, what do you want the District facilities to provide for students and the community?

Common themes about benefits, expressed by both groups (staff and community):

- Optimal class sizes;
- Balanced and/or equitable access and opportunities for all students;
- Financial economies that can be achieved through some sort of right-sizing.

Common themes about concerns, expressed by both groups:

- Will there be room for future enrollment growth? *Should we consider other options, too?*
- In any process (configuration) selected, assure that the quality of the schools/educational program for students is the highest priority.

There were other common themes between the two groups which make good sense to consider while planning for any change in the number of buildings utilized by the district. These

include providing adequate parking, continue to provide safety, and address the positive public perception about Sunrise ELC as a space dedicated to 4 and 5-year-old kindergarteners.

Priorities for the district's facilities, regardless of the building option selected:

- The staff participants' priorities for district facilities is that they provide quality learning spaces that promote and accommodate a variety of age-appropriate learning opportunities, with adequate consideration of the type of spaces needed to serve the various needs of students.
- The community participants' most important priority for district facilities is that a high quality educational program is provided to students, regardless of the building configuration (design), while considering the tax impact.

From reviewing all the comments, I drew the following conclusions:

1. Place a special focus on how to maintain optimal class sizes to provide equal, high quality opportunities for all students.
2. The financial economies that can be achieved by right-sizing make good sense to the majority of the participants.
3. The emphasis for any plan should be on how any right-sizing solution benefits the community (taxpayers) both financially and educationally.
4. The staff should be involved in the planning stages of any building remodeling so that any building plan best serves students. While it was recognized by both groups that remodeling and updating is required to make this change, updated facilities appear to be more important to staff than to the community. This makes sense. Staff are 'hands-on' in the schools and understand how education needs can be met through building design.
5. Community members also expressed a concern about what will be done with vacant buildings.
6. Be transparent throughout the process to build trust by providing ongoing, accurate information to the public.

The feedback collected from staff and community member is analyzed separately below.

STAFF FEEDBACK

Number of staff participating: 35

As described above, during the sessions participants were asked to respond to **two questions related specifically to the three-building option**. They were asked to identify **potential benefits** and **potential concerns**.

Summary:

The **design of the school(s) is very important to staff participants**. This was obvious because staff identified potential **benefits and concerns** related to any potential design. From the comments, it appears that the design should be:

- age appropriate;
- large enough to provide sufficient space to fulfill the promise of optimal class sizes;
- allow appropriate space for scheduling to meet the needs of students;
- be flexible to meet individual needs;
- and allow equitable access to all services and programs for all students.

There were also comments related to safety, supervision, and providing room for future enrollment growth.

Staff: Potential **benefits** according to themes:

- 1. Balanced, equitable access for all students to all services: 24 comments**
i.e. Class sizes; special services; shared staff, special education; all families have access to daycare
- 2. Financial economies: 22 comments**
i.e. Fewer buildings to maintain; reduction of duplicate services; transportation
- 3. Modern facilities: 16 comments**
i.e. Flexible learning spaces; ability to meet all students needs (staff in one place); safety features; infrastructure for modern learning
- 4. Collaboration for staff: 11 comments**
i.e. Consistent communication between staff at grade levels; consistency in curriculum and learning experiences; staff collaboration
- 5. Creating a sense of belonging: 8 comments**
i.e. For both students and parents, relationships are important

Staff - Potential **concerns** according to themes:

- 1. Design of the school(s): 27 comments**
i.e. Sufficient space for all students - bathrooms, gym, playgrounds, specials, work areas, etc; age appropriate spaces; safety for large schools; separating 8th grade from HS and 4th from MS
- 2. Scheduling: 17 comments**
i.e. Class sizes, case loads, staffing, supervision (safety)
- 3. Traffic/transportation: 17 comments**
i.e. Parking (around Park); traffic (Park); bussing
- 4. History of opening/closing schools: 11 comments**
i.e. People like Sunrise; trust - history of other referendums
- 5. Room for future enrollment/community growth: 10 comments**
i.e. Would like to see other options; 3-buildings seems drastic

Less frequent comments: Neighborhoods (3) and cost (6)

Then staff were asked the third question to identify priorities for district facilities, regardless of the number of buildings.

The staff's priorities for district facilities is that they provide quality learning spaces that promote/accommodate a variety of age appropriate learning opportunities: (29 votes)
i.e. flexible spaces, meeting individual needs, modern, innovative, with sufficient space and staffing for optimal class sizes, case loads, supervision and safety. There were eight comments to keep Sunrise open.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

Number of community participants: 95

Like was done in the staff conversations, after an initial presentation, community members were asked to identify **potential benefits** and **potential concerns** regarding a three-building option.

Community - Potential **benefits** according to themes:

- 1. Financial economies (20 comments)**
i.e. Cost savings, proactive approach, removes duplication of services
- 2. Class sizes, consistent offerings for all (12 comments)**
i.e. Optimal class sizes, balanced offerings for all students, consistent
- 3. Same-aged peers together (11 comments)**

i.e. Same-age peers start and end together (sense of belonging); family involvement; volunteers in one place; stability for homeless children

4. Updated facilities (3 comments)

5. Attract and retain staff, provides more collaboration (3 comments)

Community - Potential **concerns** according to themes:

1. Slow down the decision-making process, consider other options (23 comments)

i.e. Drastic change for a slow decline in enrollment; What are the other options, is there enough room in three buildings?

Related to this was what happens to enrollment when people have less choices comments); Will it deter community growth when schools close?

2. Assure the quality of schools (22 comments)

And specifically - appropriate age groupings; class sizes; maintain family "feel"; activities; will there be more bullying?

3. Cost of maintaining and/or disposing of vacated buildings (17 comments)

4. Provide the facts/be transparent (11 comments)

i.e. What is the cost to taxpayers?; how the money be spent ; how long for cost recovery; what will it cost if nothing is done?

5. Keep Sunrise or an Early Learning Center (11 comments)

Parents/public like current concept

6. Bussing, traveling, traffic (8 comments)

Also, like with staff, community members were asked a third question to identify priorities for the district's facilities, regardless of the number of buildings.

The community participants' most important priority for district facilities is that a quality educational program will be provided to students, regardless of the building configuration (design): (37 votes)

This was expressed in many ways, such as: provide most effective educational environment; quality education; students achieve their goals for future; appropriate programming; focus on academic programming; students are prepared for life after high school, etc.

The comments were analyzed by:

Dorreen Dembski, Owner
DD Communication Services, LLC
dorreendembski@gmail.com
262-689-9891