

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS DECLINING ENROLLMENT COMMITTEE

Update 7.21.23

The Elementary Declining Enrollment Committee remains dedicated to tackling the problem of declining student enrollment in District 51. Recently, we concluded meetings #5 and #6 in late June and early July. Throughout these sessions, our primary focus has been on fostering discussions on the topic of addressing declining enrollment, reviewing research on the issue and learning from other districts and content experts, and exploring viable approaches to addressing the challenge of declining enrollment in D51. The committee has looked specifically at the elementary school level with the objective of establishing equipped and empowered elementary schools with strong teams, effective student support systems and resources, and high-quality facilities.

In meeting #5, the committee discussed the format for the final recommendation that will be presented to the Board of Education (BOE) in September. The proposed format is a Recommendation Report. A final report will allow us to summarize the committee's work and provide a comprehensive view of their efforts and recommendations to the BOE. This report will serve as a tool to educate and inform the community on the challenges posed by declining enrollment in the district, as well as the work of the Elementary Declining Enrollment Committee (EDEC). Furthermore, the report will propose a range of recommendations that the BOE can consider and adopt to address this issue. The five "pathways" that the committee will continue to explore in the coming months, and will be reported on in the final report, are Consolidations/Closures, a possible mill levy, further work to promote robust and aligned options and programs in the district to attract and retain families and students, subsidize school staffing and provide flexible support through possible future increases in per pupil funding from the state, and an ongoing evaluation of central office staffing and programs through a cost-benefit analysis/program evaluation. Paths two through five would be turned over to existing Strategic Plan Priority Action Teams to further explore, while the consolidation/closure pathway needs to be further explored in depth by the EDEC because D51 does not have an existing committee working on that topic outside of the EDEC.

During meeting #4, the committee engaged in an exercise reviewing research-based consolidation criteria and evaluating their objectivity and appropriateness within our D51/Grand Valley context. This process enabled the committee to identify potential unintended consequences associated with specific criteria. Committee members then individually examined each criteria, delving deeper into their implications and benefits, which were posted separately on the wall. During meeting #4, committee members each voted on individual potential criteria, indicating criteria as "Most Viable; I Support This", "This Could Work, But Presents Challenges", or "Absolutely Unviable and Should Be Eliminated."

During meeting #5, the committee worked on creating an initial version of tiered criteria to assess and rank elementary schools for potential consolidation. After a review of the previously utilized criteria by our demographer, and a review of potential additional criteria brought forward during the last meeting, the committee then took time to delineate and examine the criteria brought forward during the last meeting. They were asked to weigh the pros and cons of each potential criteria and determine how they felt about the proposed criteria. The committee then engaged in a consensus-building exercise. Using the same criteria from meeting #4 they ranked each criteria indicating them as "Most viable; I support this", "This could work, but presents challenges", or "Absolutely unviable and should be eliminated".

Committee members who ranked any criteria as "This could work, but presents challenges", or "Absolutely unviable and should be eliminated" were asked to share their thoughts and/or concerns guiding their decision. During this discussion, several key questions were raised, including the desired outcome, how we will define success, and the number of students who would be affected by school consolidation. Additionally, there was a discussion surrounding a need to address immediate and long-term solutions and strategically plan for the future, whether there is an increase in student enrollment in the future or not. The meeting ended with members asked to complete a survey intended to give the committee a better understanding of the overall consensus on the importance of each criteria.

The committee reconvened on July 11, for meeting #6 to continue their work on potential consolidation/closure criteria. The meeting opened with an overview of the Community Townhall Meetings that had been conducted since the previous committee session. These townhall events took place at Orchard Mesa Middle School, with an additional virtual meeting held via Facebook Live. The primary focus of these meetings was to engage the community in a discussion about the issue of declining enrollment in the district while also providing an overview of the Elementary Declining Enrollment Committee's charge.

At the conclusion of each townhall, attendees were given the opportunity to participate in a survey, which aimed to gather valuable input, questions, and concerns from community members. The intent behind the survey was to collect the responses and provide the committee with a more comprehensive understanding of the questions that remain unanswered within the community and assess the general perception of this topic. The committee recognizes the significance of incorporating community input in our decision-making process, and the survey results would serve as a resource to guide future discussions and actions.

The committee then reviewed their own survey results from meeting #5, which members were tasked with completing at the end of the last meeting. The committee engaged in an analysis of how each criteria was ranked, considering the feedback received for each criteria.

Next, committee members were asked to individually review the criteria based on the respective tiers they were ranked in and the outcome of the survey results. They were then divided into groups and participated in open conversations at their respective tables to discuss their thoughts and concerns regarding Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 criteria. The committee discussions were guided by two questions: whether they all agreed on the selected criteria in Tier 1, 2, or 3 and how they intended to apply these criteria.

The committee aimed to reach a consensus on the criteria. However, as discussions progressed, concerns were raised about the method of application of these criteria to schools. The committee specifically discussed the potential imbalance of solely focusing on Tier 1 criteria and whether or not there should be a longer list of criteria that are all applied but weighted differently. The majority of the committee expressed a preference for a weighted approach rather than a tiered approach. The criteria were not finalized in meeting #6, so the conversation will continue at meeting #7.

The work of this committee is complex, demanding, and challenging. However, committee members are committed to working together in order to establish a plan that effectively addresses this issue of declining enrollment. Our efforts remain rooted in the district's Strategic Plan and are driven by the overarching goal of prioritizing the best interests of our students, families, and staff members.

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