

COMMUNITY FORUM ON SCHOOL CONFIGURATION

DECEMBER 19 & 20, 7:00 PM
MILLBURN WEST



MILLBURN DISTRICT 24 BOARD OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Millburn District 24 is an excellent district. That said the school board and administration are always looking for ways to make our district event better. Sometimes we find that our current approach is best. Sometimes we find that a new approach offers the possibility of taking us to the next level. For the past two years the board and administration have discussed the pros and cons of retaining our current K-8 configuration versus changing to a grade level configuration.

Under our current K-8 configuration, Millburn Central and West buildings each serve all grades, kindergarten through eighth grade. Under a grade level configuration one building would serve grades K-5 and the other grades 6-8.

At Millburn West, on December 19 and 20, 2011 beginning at 7:00 PM, the board of education and superintendent will host a community forum to discuss whether to switch from our current K-8 configuration to a grade level configuration.

RECONFIGURATION DECISION TIMELINE

At this point in the decision process, teachers, administrators, and the Facilities and Finance Committee have completed their research and made recommendations. The next steps in the decision process are as follows.

December 19 & 20	At two identical forums, parents of Millburn children and other community members will learn about the research and recommendations, and provide their perspectives.
January 9	At the committee of the whole meeting, the board will discuss reconfiguration.
January 18	At the regular board meeting, the board will make a final decision regarding configuration.

This timeline and approach ensure that the board does not begin discussing reconfiguration until after it has heard from teachers, administrators, parents, and other community members and reviewed all the research. The board has one month to analyze the research and stakeholders' perspectives, and two meetings to decide the issue. Parents and other community members have one month to review the research and two opportunities to communicate to the board at board meetings. If the board decides to reconfigure, administrators have sufficient time to do so prior to the September 2011 to June 2012 school year.

FORUM FORMAT

At each of the forums, Superintendent Lind for 30 minutes will discuss work completed followed by an open ended question and answer session. Those attending will be asked to be respectful, limit their comments to 5 minutes, and avoid repeating information already presented.

DOCUMENT PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to provide the information presented at the forums at a greater level of depth than can be presented in the forum's half hour overview timeslot. But this document does not capture the depth of detail available from the Facilities and Finance Committee's research.

Our hope is that this document will benefit people reading it before or after the forums as well as those unable to attend the forums. This document uses a question and answer approach. Our hope is that our questions and sequencing of questions will closely align to your own.

WHY ARE WE CONSIDERING RECONFIGURATION?

The board first considered reconfiguration as part of the Informational Forum of May 2010. At that forum, the board presented where our district wanted to go, where we were, the gap, the road up to that point, and alternatives to consider. At that time, “where we were” was summarized as follows.

REPORT CARD

- A High academic standards
- B Well rounded education
- B Reasonable class sizes
- F Balanced budget with 25% contingency

The primary drivers were a poor economy, declining home market values, a large district debt, expenses exceeding revenues by an average of \$1,800,000 per year for four years in a row, and declining enrollment. State revenues were stable. Class sizes were reasonable.

At that forum, the board requested public input on the feasibility of ten alternatives, one of which was reconfiguration. Since reconfiguration was first discussed in the context of cutting costs, reconfiguration was perceived by many primarily as a cost cutting measure estimated to save roughly \$300,000 per year.

The board chose to balance the budget and pay down the debt by running a referendum to increase revenues. When the referendum failed, the board chose to balance the budget and pay down the debt by rifting nontenured and tenured teachers, and combining bands and sports teams. Class sizes increased.

Since then, the economy has continued to worsen. This year many home owners will see declining home market values with increased taxes. Enrollment declined and is still projected to decline. The state continued to decrease revenues and decided not to pay money that was promised to our district. Next year we may lose all of our transportation reimbursement. As a result, last year our district lost \$1,142,000. On the merits of being a cost cutting alternative, considering reconfiguration moved up in priority.

In May 2010, shortly after the forum, our district began a strategic plan. During stage 2/5, “Engaging the Staff and Community”, our district surveyed the community regarding whether they preferred K-8 or grade level centers if cost was not an issue. The results were split roughly 50-50.

Based on the results of the survey, four major strategic planning areas were identified: Communications, Student Learning, Facilities and Finance, and Culture and Climate.

At the first strategic planning session in May, community members were invited to attend a “Community Involvement Day.” At this meeting, stakeholders worked together to begin to identify district priorities in each of the four areas. Committees were formed to focus on each of these areas, and everyone who volunteered was assigned to a committee. Within a short time, the committees realized that their decision processes hinged on the configuration option chosen. Considering reconfiguration again moved up in priority.

One of the Facilities and Finance Committee’s goals was to maximize the utilization of facilities and faculty to enhance and/or maintain the quality of student learning. So their committee was charged with researching reconfiguration. The committee was comprised of eleven men and women from Central and West, teachers, and administrators with preferences for both K-8 and grade level centers.

As part of their work on this topic, the committee hosted two identical community input forum days in September. Community members were asked to answer the question: “What information do you think the Board of Education needs to make an informed decision regarding the district’s building configuration (K-8 or grade-level center)?” The committee used the feedback they received to guide their research into the question of configuration.

The board conveyed the following expectations to Superintendent Lind for organizing committees and setting their goals.

- Let them know up front that their research and discussions will take considerable effort.
- Ensure that the process is fair and that everyone's voice is heard.
- Provide the task force with every issue and question known to board members, administrators, parents and teachers.
- Be available to provide the task force with whatever assistance they need.
- Ask the task force to make decisions based on research, cite their sources, and ensure that the research is timely and relevant to Millburn's situation.
- Ask the task force to reach a consensus so that they would challenge each others' perspectives and facts.
- Ask the task force to present their report to the board only after they had sufficient time to reach a conclusion that the addition of more time would not change.

WHAT DID THE FACILITIES AND FINANCE COMMITTEE LEARN?

The Facilities and Finance Committee met weekly for three months. The following slides show the areas considered, with the areas that proved to be the greatest differentiators between configurations shown in boldface type.

Financial Considerations

- ◆ **Transportation Costs**
- ◆ **Staffing Efficiencies**
- ◆ Activities/Electives
- ◆ Required Transformations/Building Updates
- ◆ Efficiencies in Building Utilization
- ◆ Elimination of Duplicate Resources

Non Financial Considerations

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| ◆ Scheduling | ◆ Educational Experience |
| ◆ Electives/Activities and Specials | ◆ Parent Involvement and Community Impact |
| ◆ Instructional Time | ◆ Time at School and on Bus |
| ◆ Social and Emotional Impacts | ◆ Property Value |
| ◆ Discipline | ◆ Expansion Flexibility |

The committee found studies favoring K-8 or grade level centers for almost any given topic. But when they looked closer at the research they often found that the studies were outdated or did not apply to Millburn’s situation. Specifically, Millburn has two schools in close proximity, with demographics well suited for quality education.

The advantages of each configuration option are shown below.

ADVANTAGES OF K-8

- Students and parents have a higher comfort level.
- Performance tends to drop when a transition to a new building occurs, however the effects for most students are not long-term.
- Some sixth and seventh grade students have shown greater improvement in math/reading in a K-8 configuration, but these same studies show the groups had identical testing results in ninth grade.
- Older students act as role models for younger students.
- Students can participate in peer mentoring programs.

INTRODUCTION

- K-8 schools tend to maintain higher levels of parent involvement.
- K-8 schools tend to report fewer suspensions and better attendance.
- All children in a family are on the same daily schedule.

DRAFT

ADVANTAGES OF GRADE LEVEL CENTERS

- There is a financial benefit of approximately \$225,000.
- Grade level centers would allow Millburn families to unite under same schools structure.
- Grade level centers distribute resource and student population more equitably.
- More classrooms per grade translate into more opportunities to match students to teachers according to learning and teaching styles.
- Grade level centers allow greater opportunities for teacher collaboration or mentoring.
- Elementary and middle school scheduling is more efficient.
- Grade level centers provide greater opportunity for elective or exploratory courses.
- Younger students are not exposed to poor upper grade behavior.
- Grading periods will be uniform within each building (trimesters / quarters).
- Services to special education students are more consistent in a grade level center configuration.
- Middle school allows opportunity to build positive relationships; this bonding is the groundwork for future academic success and personal / social development.

NEUTRAL

- Research does not overwhelmingly support either configuration.
- Neither configuration guarantees student achievement or social adjustment.
- Schools have been largely configured based on the needs of the community.
- School leadership can provide effective educational programs regardless of grade configuration.

HOW IMPORTANT IS CONFIGURATION IN EDUCATION?

The committee learned that the primary indicator of student success is neither configuration nor class size. It is demographics, specifically socio-economic factors. Our children are likely to do well under either configuration.

Studies indicate that 60-80% of a student's success comes from within the student, either due to their home/parent environment or the skills and abilities that they bring to school. The other 20-40% is broken down between the teacher driving 15%-25% of the impact with all other items falling into the remaining percentage%.

Class size is one factor to consider when evaluating a school's effectiveness, but small class size alone does not ensure a good education. The quality of the teaching, the school leadership, size of the school, the amount of parent involvement and other factors are important to consider, too.

The importance of class sizes has been studied in numerous articles with varying results. Most of the support demonstrated an improved performance for children when class sizes are lower, especially in the early elementary years.

The research behind class size impact was not differentiated between GLC or K-8 configurations, but rather spoke to supporting evidence that class sizes are less relevant to how well the child comes prepared for school in addition to the teacher qualifications.

WHICH CONFIGURATION OPTION WAS RECOMMENDED?

On December 5, 2010, the Facilities and Finance Committee made a two hour presentation of their findings to the board. They stopped short of an outright recommendation, but unanimously reported that grade level centers were the best option for our district at this point. The four factors that most influenced their decision were: reduced cost, greater equity across schools, easier scheduling, and greater specialization/differentiation.

A poll of teachers favored grade level centers 80 to 38.

Administrators favored grade level centers as well.

When asked, the Facilities and Finance Committee said they had sufficient time to complete their research, and that given more time, they would not change their position.

WHY IS THERE A COST SAVINGS WITH GRADE LEVEL CONFIGURATIONS?

Your intuition might tell you that having a grade of 120 children in one building or two should cost the same. Certainly there are cases when this is true. Given a maximum class size of 30, four teachers could have 30 students per class. Given \$60,000 per teacher, the cost would be \$240,000. The teacher cost would be the same if one school had all the students, one school had 30 students and the other 90, or both had 60 students.

But what if 36 students attend the first school, and 84 attend the other? Then we need 2 teachers at the first school and 3 teachers at the other for a total of five 5 teachers, at an additional cost of approximately \$60,000.

With nine grades, K-8 could cost as much as $9 * \$60,000 = \$540,000$ more than grade level configuration. The impact changes randomly based on the specific number of students attending each grade at each school each year.

HOW IMPORTANT IS COST SAVINGS?

Over 80% of our budget is teacher salaries and benefits. So efficient allocation of teachers to students has a major impact on total expenses.

The estimated cost savings of \$225,000 is only 1.3% of the district's \$17,600,000 budget. It is only 20% of the district's \$1,142,000 loss last year. Reconfiguring on its own will not balance the budget.

But a \$225,000 savings affects retaining non-mandated programs such as band and sports, retaining teachers at \$60,000 per year, and our ability to borrow. With \$5,300,000 in debt, we need tax anticipation warrants (TAWs) to manage our cash flow. We are less likely to have access to TAWs if we don't have a balanced budget.

Even if the board chooses grade level centers, the \$225,000 cost savings on its own will not save non-mandated programs or teachers if additional funding provided by the state is lost.

Superintendent Lind and several board members spoke directly with state senators and representatives locally and in Springfield and attended Illinois Association of School Board (IASB) conferences during the past two months. The consensus was that the economy will continue to suffer for the next several years, and the state will continue to reduce our funding.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF CLASS SIZE UNDER EACH CONFIGURATION?

Average class sizes overall will not be impacted significantly, but the variance between grades will certainly be decreased.

The K-8 configuration poses several problems.

- Central has more sessions per grade level, offering more opportunities for specialization and differentiation.
- For any given grade level the class size can differ significantly between Central and West.
- Scheduling is more difficult.
- West has lower class sizes than Central overall.
- It is harder to maintain small class sizes for lower grades in a K-8 configuration than with grade level configuration.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPECIALIZATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

The following slide shows the estimated class sizes next year under grade level (left) and K-8 (right) configurations, assuming we maintain the same class sizes as we did this year. We have 50 teachers this year but will need only 48 next year. Since enrollment is declining, more students will be graduating from eighth grade than will be enrolling in kindergarten so two fewer teachers will be needed.

					Central				West			
K	130	32.50	4	2012/13	K	95	31.67	3	K	35	35.00	1
1	124	31.00	4		1	87	29.00	3	1	37	37.00	1
2	136	27.20	5	K-5 Enroll	2	104	26.00	4	2	32	32.00	1
3	177	29.50	6	928	3	128	32.00	4	3	49	24.50	2
4	172	28.67	6		4	122	30.50	4	4	50	25.00	2
5	189	31.50	6	6-8 Enroll	5	135	33.75	4	5	54	27.00	2
6	212	35.33	6	586	6	145	36.25	4	6	67	33.50	2
7	197	32.83	6		7	141	35.25	4	7	56	28.00	2
8	177	35.40	5		8	112	37.33	3	8	65	32.50	2
Totals	1514	31.54	48		Totals	1069	32.39	33	Totals	445	29.67	15

Under K-8, Central offers 3 or 4 sessions per grade for specialization and differentiation; and West offers only 1 or 2. Under grade level centers, 4, 5, or 6 sessions per grade for specialization or differentiation can be offered.

CLASS SIZE VARIANCES

Note above that overall the combined average class size of 31.54 for grade level centers is close to the average K-8 at Central of 32.39 and West at 29.67. But under K-8, West has much larger kindergarten and first grade classes.

Consider the sessions at Central and West for 6th grade shown below.

SUBJECT	CENTRAL	WEST
SCIENCE	27, 33, 36, 38	25, 26
SOCIAL STUDIES	31, 34, 34, 34	22, 24
MATH	19, 22, 23, 32, 34	12, 18, 22
LITERATURE	16, 16, 30, 32, 33	9, 21, 21
LANGUAGE ARTS	30, 32, 33, 36	26, 26

For science, social studies, math, literature, and language arts, class size ranges from 16 to 38 at Central, and 9 to 26 at West.

SCHEDULING

The following slide shows the estimated class sizes next year under grade level (left) and K-8 (right) configurations assuming our district maintains 50 homeroom sections as we did this year.

					Central				West			
K	130	26.00	5	2012/13	K	95	23.75	4	K	35	35.00	1
1	124	24.80	5		1	87	29.00	3	1	37	18.50	2
2	136	27.20	5	K-5 Enroll	2	104	26.00	4	2	32	32.00	1
3	177	29.50	6	928	3	128	32.00	4	3	49	24.50	2
4	172	28.67	6		4	122	30.50	4	4	50	25.00	2
5	189	31.50	6	6-8 Enroll	5	135	33.75	4	5	54	27.00	2
6	212	35.33	6	586	6	145	36.25	4	6	67	33.50	2
7	197	32.83	6		7	141	35.25	4	7	56	28.00	2
8	177	35.40	5		8	112	37.33	3	8	65	32.50	2
Totals	1514	30.28	50		Totals	1069	31.44	34	Totals	445	27.81	16

Where would we put the 2 teachers to help in areas of greatest need relative to class size?

We would put the first one in first grade at West because it has the largest class size.

We would put the second teacher at Central kindergarten because more children would get the benefits of the teacher than the one kindergarten class at West. Had we put that teacher at West kindergarten instead, Central would have a class size of 31.67 versus 17.5 at West – too big a discrepancy.

But fixing one inequity just creates another. For kindergarten, West has 35.00 students versus Central's 23.75. For first grade, Central has 29.00 students versus West's 18.50.

UNDER K-8 WEST HAS SMALLER CLASS SIZES

Under K-8, West has smaller class sizes than Central.

UNDER K-8 CENTRAL HAS MORE SESSIONS

But under K-8, Central has more sessions and more opportunities for specialization and differentiation.

UNDER GRADE LEVEL CENTERS, BOTH SCHOOLS BENEFIT

Under grade level centers, Central students benefit with smaller class sizes. Both Central and West students benefit with more sessions and more opportunities for specialization and differentiation, but West students benefit most because West has the greatest increase in sessions.

WHY DON'T WE JUST REDISTRICT INSTEAD?

The board and administration considered redistricting some subdivisions' students from Central to West to reduce class size variances.

Intuitively you might think that if classes are imbalanced, we should be able to redistrict and move students from one school to the other. But it turns out that as we move students from Central to West, Central's class sizes are disrupted more than West's are fixed. The uneven distribution of the student population by grade, declining enrollment, and mid-year additions and subtractions would introduce all the variance issues we face now. It would be impractical to redistrict from year to year to find the combination of subdivisions that would minimize the number of teachers needed to maintain class size targets for each grade.

IF WE CHOOSE TO RECONFIGURE, WHY RECONFIGURE NOW?

If reconfiguring provides the best solution, our district would reap the benefits of that solution sooner.

IF WE CHOOSE TO RECONFIGURE, CAN WE SWITCH BACK IN THE FUTURE?

We are likely to keep the configuration the board chooses for five years.

WHY RECONFIGURE IF WE MAY CLOSE WEST?

It is only practical to forecast for five years. Within our current five year forecast, enrollment is declining. But in five years the projected enrollment will still exceed the capacity of Central.

IF WE CHOOSE TO RECONFIGURE, WHICH BUILDING IS K-5 AND 6-8?

Central would house K-5, and West would house 6-8. The facilities at Central are more conducive to the larger number of students that would be attending the school in K-5. The building also has the ability to house our early childhood programs along with 9 kindergarten sections if needed.

WHAT ARE THE COMMUNITY'S NEXT STEPS?

Although the board has heard from teachers, administrators, and the Facilities and Finance Committee, it would like to engage parents and community members one more time before making a final decision.

Please:

1. Take the time to understand the work completed so far.
2. Attend a forum.
3. Be prepared to explain your support for a configuration option and explain how that option provides the best education for our children that our district can afford.
4. Support the decision the board makes.