

**Jefferson County Schools Community Conversation
On Funding and Facilities Options
September 28, 2009**

The following document is a summary of the themes that appeared regularly throughout the community dialogue on September 28. Nearly 165 citizens attended the meeting, listened to a presentation on the funding and enrollment issues of the district and worked in small groups to address four questions:

1. What do you most hope any of the proposed changes will preserve or change?
2. What principles or values do you most want the Board to use in making their decisions?
3. What questions are most important for the session on October 19th?
4. What information do you need to understand the options and their impact.

Below are the major themes that came out of the September 28 meeting.

Separation and safety. This theme appeared in many forms but remains near the top of the list. “Will my child be safe?” The theme included the construction of the building, the sharing of space with older students, age-appropriate learning, and safe transportation?

- Participants wondered if the district could provide conceptual drawings of any building options so that they can see how the space is planned out and what kind of controls could be used to provide adequate separation of age and grade groups.

Extra-curricular activities. Significant energy was generated by the availability of extra-curricular activities. Participants feared the loss of music, sports and other extra-curricular activities for the 6th graders. These brought up strong feelings.

- Consider alternatives that allow for 6th grade participation.
- Create alternatives that would provide transportation if possible.

Keeping schools small enough for students to maintain identities and feel connected. The discussion of size relates to class ratios but also to the ability of students to be known. People cited the names of staff and faculty who knew their children and who they trusted. The changes make them worry that this will be lost.

Funding and cost. People continue to have questions about how much the savings are in the different options and if there are any other options. What will the millage rate increase mean to me? How are the reserves used and can that change the planning choices? What cuts have been made in the central office?

Political Process. People have questions about the process, how decisions will be made, and how they can interact with the Board. Some would like to have a large town hall meeting so that they can ask questions from the floor. Some would like to hear the Board members state their positions and why. One idea was to allow people to fill out surveys at the meeting.

Below are the 4 questions and summaries of the questions. The lists of all the responses from the groups are available.

What do you most hope any of the proposed changes will preserve or change?

Responses to this question fell into four broad categories:

1. Class size and school identity
2. Safety and Separation
3. Availability of extra-curricular activities
4. Strong Academics
5. Travel

It's important to note that the first four of these categories received similar levels of support – generated the most commentary from participants. The transportation issue received mention three times but it echoed the larger theme of safety and separation.

Class size and school identity– The size of the classes and ensuring that the students had a sense of identity were important. People wanted to make sure that the students did not get lost and that their schools had a sense of identity as well.

Safety and Separation– This theme appears regularly. While there is an underlying theme of safety, the theme of age appropriate educational settings is also expressed.

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Availability of extra-curricular activities – Making sure that the students did not lose their opportunities for extra-curricular activities was strongly expressed. They wanted to make sure that the 6th graders would have the opportunity to participate in sports and in music.

Strong Academics – Of equal importance in this question was the desire to keep a strong focus on academics. From technology, like on-line learning programs, to other programs like Connections and standardized test preparation, they wanted their children prepared.

Transportation time and safety – Though a smaller number responded, the earlier theme of safety and age mixing were mentioned among the things hoped for.

What principles or values do you most want the board to use in making their decision?

The total number of responses in this category was small. The ideas fell into two categories:

1. Ensuring that good staff and teachers are kept.
2. Raising taxes to make sure the quality of schools does not decline.

Ensure we keep excellent teachers and staff – Community members wanted to look for options to spare the loss of staff. They wanted that to be the last option.

Taxes – Some participants suggested tax increases if they were needed to maintain quality schools. Others wanted no tax increases.

What questions are most important for the session on October 19th?

Some wrote questions that the group should discuss and some wrote down questions they wanted to have answered, so there is some overlap with question 4, which lists information that respondents wanted to have. Responses to this question fell into six categories:

1. Instructional detail
2. Building issues
3. Political process issues
4. Cost issues
5. Opportunities for extra-curricular activities
6. Staff and leadership issues

It's important to note that the first four of these categories generated the most commentary from participants. The last two categories, while fewer in number, were also mentioned in other parts of the discussion.

Instructional detail – An array of questions about instruction and classes were raised. How large will the classes be? Will there be sufficient dress and conduct codes? Will students be known and have a sense of identity? How will these changes impact the children?

Building issues – Again, the building issues related to the theme of safety and separation. What will the layout look like? Will younger children be safe? How much of the space will have to be shared by different grade and age groups? What will happen to the old buildings? Will the old buildings be left empty and vandalized?

Political process issues – This category related to the process of making the decision. People wanted to know the process and whether or not it was open-minded? Some wanted to know if there would be meetings in their districts. Could we use anonymous surveys?

Cost issues – The economic impact was a major part of the conversation about cost. What would the impact be on the millage rate? What impact would job cuts have on the county economy? What does the money in reserve mean and how will it be used? What are the implications if we make no changes?

Opportunities for extra-curricular activities – Another of the recurring issues is extra-curricular activities for the 6th graders. Would the 6th graders still be able to participate in music and sports and other activities? Would there be transportation for after school activities?

Staff and leadership issues – Are there any alternatives to layoffs? Will attrition really take care of the reductions that are needed? Will the middle school have its own principal? Will we lose staff and teachers that are important to us?