

# North Shore School District 112 Focus Group Report

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**Reconfiguration 2.0 Community Team  
February 22 and 23, 2017**

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**Executive Summary:** The following report provides summary data and analysis from the two focus groups held at the North Shore School District 112 Headquarters building in Highland Park, Illinois on February 22 and 23, 2017. There were 33 total participants across both of the nights, including a self-selected group of parents of past, current, and future district students; current and retired District 112 teachers; and community members without children. There was a wide age range among participants and a diversity of long-time versus recent residents. Recruitment methods included placement of newspaper ads, outreach to schools, and phone-based outreach.

There were three primary objectives of these discussions: (1) gauge community understanding about current and future needs of the school district, 2) learn why the previous referendum failed and better understand community priorities or desires for a future plan, and 3) set clear priorities for engagement and the Reconfiguration 2.0 Community Team’s efforts moving forward.

### **Key Takeaways**

**Building Trust and Setting Tone:** Building trust through a collaborative process remains critical to District 112’s success. Many participants were concerned about the tone of past dialogue around reconfiguration. The tone we set should be objective and forward-looking.

**Establish a Fact Pattern:** There are differing opinions over what some would consider “basic” facts surrounding facilities conditions and finances. The 2.0 Community Team should focus on establishing an agreed-upon fact pattern around these issues, particularly during opportunities for engagement such as the upcoming community forums. Additionally, many participants talked about academics and facilities as separate issues. We must find a way to highlight how these issues are interconnected.

**Change is Needed.** “Everybody [in Highland Park] wants to eat an omelet but nobody wants to break an egg to make it.” Nearly all focus group participants agreed that there is a need for change in the district. Participants expressed near consensus that consolidation is needed. No one said we should keep all schools open. Additionally, some participants discussed whether the district’s finances could be better managed to mitigate the effects of or need for school closures, especially in regards for administration spending.

**Quality of Curriculum and Education.** While there was some disparity of opinion over the quality of the current elementary school curriculum, most participants agreed that high-quality teachers and the high-level involvement of parents in the district is a true asset and a driving factor for District 112’s high performance. A few parents of current students voiced that teachers may be concerned about job security and may be looking for jobs in neighboring districts.

**Diversity is Valued.** “Diversity” was cited a number of times from parents and community members alike as a primary reason for why they value the school district. Participants would like to maintain or enhance this sense of diversity with any reconfiguration plan. The Dual Language

program was repeatedly mentioned as an exemplary program, an example of “diversity” in practice within the district.

**Focus on Equity.** While the discussions did not center on specific features or plans for reconfiguration, participants agreed that any reconfiguration plan should prioritize equity of resources and opportunities. Equity across facilities and programming was indicated as paramount for the success of this process. The process for closing and consolidating schools must be done in an equitable way.

**Preferred Class Size/Sections per Grade.** Much discussion centered on the “optimal class size” for the district’s schools. Some participants expressed preference for smaller, more intimate class sizes (approximately 14 students), citing a smaller student-to-teacher ratio to support this viewpoint. Others preferred a larger class size (approximately 22-24 students) to allow for more collaboration and diversity in the classroom. This dialogue included discussion regarding the optimal number of sections per grade at each school. While there was no consensus on an “optimal” number, most participants agreed that two offerings of the same grade was too little. Some parents and community members mentioned four as being a nice number for students (in terms of increased opportunities for socialization) and for teachers (for the facilitation of lesson planning and mentorship amongst teachers). There was agreement during both focus groups that grade level teams were helpful for allowing for teachers to plan and collaborate with one another.

**Tax Increase Support.** Attendees agreed that they would support a tax increase if the reconfiguration plan proposed was one they felt was sensible and clearly communicated. While there was not necessarily a specific number voiced for an optimal tax increase, many did share that the most recent referendum effort requested far too much and lacked clarity. The fact that it was also labeled and recognized as “the most expensive referendum” in Illinois school system history may have contributed to the lack of support, according to some participants. Additionally, it was expressed that the tax implications of any referendum plan should be considered within the larger context of funding requests/demands by the high school, the park district, the city, and other taxing districts.

**Grade Configuration.** In the first discussion, most participants accepted a model of grouping elementary students by grade level buildings. Specifically, they responded positively to having one building for Grades K-2, and another for Grades 3-5. It was expressed that children would feel stability and support if traveling with their cohorts, despite moving to a new building every few years. The second discussion was a bit more divided on this concept. A few current parents felt children would be “arbitrarily moving,” and that it would translate to more driving for parents with multiple children. The idea of stability and support among cohorts was also expressed during this discussion.

**Comparisons to Neighboring Districts.** Across both groups, participants felt District 112 needed to stay competitive with neighboring districts. Specifically, both groups voiced concern that neighboring districts have all-day kindergarten and more updated buildings, despite similar perceived tax levels.

## Focus Group Questions

### 1. What are your impressions of the district's educational programming and priorities?

- “I moved to this district because of its strong reputation for academics.” This statement was reflected in comments by some participants, and then echoed by many others. The diversity programming options in the district was mentioned in support of this point, including dual language, STEM and arts programming. Both groups also spoke to the positive reputation of the teaching staff across the district.
- There was discrepancy in attitudes toward class sizes in the district. Some felt that small class sizes allow for more direct contact with teachers and staff. Others felt that smaller classes detract from social opportunities for students, including the ability to interact with a larger pool of classmates. This was cited more strongly in the first discussion, where a few parents of current students were concerned about the present social and emotional opportunities for their children, given the relatively small class sizes in their schools.
- As part of the dialogue around this question, many participants expressed a desire to prioritize healing wounds in the community over the past referendum and BDR3. Some participants said this is almost as important as the creation of new, viable reconfiguration options.

### 2. What are your impressions of the district's facilities?

- Most participants agreed that the district has too many facilities for the number of enrolled students, but many also expressed that the quality of education has not suffered due to this. Concern around the number of schools revolved around the costs for upkeep and staffing, but not necessarily the quality of services provided.
- While participants seemed to agree that some schools are in need of deferred maintenance or renovation, many also agreed that the larger community may not know or agree with this. A few of these participants articulated that it is the school district's responsibility, and the responsibility of the 2.0 Community Team, to communicate the state of all district facilities to district stakeholders.
- A few long-time Highland Park residents spoke to the belief that “this process is a long time coming.” These participants spoke to the notion that part of the deal with past school district consolidation was to keep the number of facilities and infrastructure as close to the same as under the previous configuration as possible. In one resident's words: “We have been kicking the can down the road [ever since].”
- “Schools become a community where classes are preserved and local atmosphere is forged.” Some focus group members spoke to the conflation of school communities and physical space. Some space-saving ideas for consolidation were voiced, which would facilitate opportunities for children to still feel a sense of community, despite changing schools or integrating with a larger community. These participants expressed that the formation of “community” is dependent on how adults define and shape it for their children.

**3. To the best of your knowledge, what is the current state of the district's finances? Moving forward, where do you believe the district's finances stand in the next 5-10 years?**

- Some participants expressed that the district is “administration top-heavy.” Employing administrators in every building and growing the central administration, despite perceived low enrollment, was seen as irresponsible by some group members. Some participants spoke to the reputation of the district as one that “bleeds money,” and expressed that the city does this as well, which affects the school system. Some long-time residents expanded on the notion of fiscal responsibility, speaking to this issue as being one that is 20-30 years old, and questioned why it has taken so long to be addressed.
- Most participants feel that the district's finances are fine for now, and some recognized that they will diminish rapidly if changes are not made soon. These individuals spoke to the importance of correct and verifiable information about finances and the overall state of the district being communicated to district residents immediately.

**4. How do you think the school district and the Reconfiguration 2.0 Community Team can best move this process forward and gain community trust?**

- Many feel that the 2.0 Community Team already has community support, and that there are strategic actions the group can take to retain and build on this support. Small group discussions and focus groups (like these) were mentioned as being helpful in gaining and maintaining community support. Some attendees spoke to the importance of involving the community in every step of the decision-making process, and in striving to always be transparent.
- Several participants mentioned widely publicizing community meetings and focus groups. Examples for hyping up these events include publicizing in local newspapers, via social media, and in community locales such as parks and the country club. Another suggestion was to more often update the website with meeting minutes, videos of meetings, etc. In short, there “should be no way anyone can say he/she was not updated on the work of 2.0.”
- Many participants also spoke to the current fissures in the district around BDR3 and past proposed closings. Some participants said — and others agreed — that the 2.0 Community Team, can assist some of the healing in the district, by facilitating more public discussions that engage an array of community members.

**5. Last year's referendum proposed consolidating the school district's facilities into a smaller number of buildings, including renovation of some facilities and some new construction. Without considering any one specific school, do you agree or disagree with the assessment that the district has too many facilities? Why or why not?**

- Most people across both groups agreed with the need for consolidation. These participants understand that there are too many buildings for the number of enrolled

students. One participant voiced: “No one wants it to be their school,” which was agreed on by most other participants. Balancing these competing priorities among community members will be key when developing and presenting the next round of reconfiguration options.

- “No community should lose everything while others only gain; there should be small, equal compromise for all community groups concerned.” Many participants spoke to the importance of equity in both resources and programming, as well as flexibility in the new plan. Total district population and neighborhood populations will continue to change: “We need the flexibility for less facilities so we can have optimal class sizes.”

**6. Previous reconfiguration analysis has included discussions around the feasibility of renovation and maintenance of all existing facilities. What do you think about this approach? Why do you (not) support this idea?**

- Many participants spoke to the need for fewer buildings and higher quality of facilities. Elements of “higher quality” included improvements to air quality, air conditioning in every building, and the removal of asbestos and mold.
- “Good teachers can teach in any space ... We should be focused on curriculum and programming, not buildings ... Buildings do not make schools, people make the schools.” A few participants spoke to the importance of improving curriculum and programming before improving facilities. They spoke to the need for a full-day Kindergarten and a more innovative elementary curriculum, saying these should be prioritized over facility management.

**7. One significant issue during the past referendum surrounded the projected cost. In your opinion, are residents of District 112 open to an increase in taxes to fund a reconfiguration plan? If so, under what circumstances? Is there any cap or limit to this increase?**

- The majority of participants said they were open to a tax increase, provided a viable and supportable reconfiguration plan. Many participants who voted down the past referendum did so because they felt it was hastily planned and did not offer viable programming and space solutions.
- Many people did speak to the high dollar amount of the past referendum, and expressed some sticker shock. The fact that it was the largest referendum in the history of the state made these community members wary of voting “yes.”
- A few people spoke about the recent high school referendum passing at \$89 million. These participants indicated that this could be used as a benchmark for a future referendum. The cost of that referendum was referred to as “sensible” and “understandable.”
- The majority of participants also felt that those without children in the district would support the schools if they understood how reconfiguration and newer facilities would affect their home values. It was widely agreed on, however, that reaching and engaging this voter demographic would be more challenging than reaching parents of

current District 112 students.

- Some participants expressed that for a referendum to pass, the district needs to account specifically for where all of the money will go. A common refrain was that the district needs to regain the trust of the community, and to do this, they need to be transparent during every step of the reconfiguration process. This includes accounting for how the money generated from tax increases would be allocated.

**8. To what extent do you believe a successful referendum effort is necessary for the district to address its educational, facilities, and financial challenges? Conversely, to what extent do you believe these challenges should be addressed through the district's existing budget?**

- A few participants in both groups felt that the district is not managing its finances responsibly and voiced concern around whether there was a need at all for a referendum. These participants expressed that the district needs to be transparent and efficient with current resources, as well as release projections of how much it could earn by selling closed buildings and the land they currently occupy. There was mention in one group that the district has not assessed current resources, or if it has, it has not done an efficient job of sharing those numbers with the community. Similarly, some participants said they would not support a new referendum until they saw attempts made at efficient spending by the district's administration. These participants expressed that they are happy to support the schools if the money is truly needed, but they have not seen evidence of this yet.

**9. Thinking about reconfiguration options moving forward, what educational programs and/or facilities investments must be developed or maintained for this district to serve our students and stay competitive with its neighbors?**

- All-day Kindergarten was mentioned as a priority by most participants across both groups. Similarly, dual language programming was repeatedly mentioned as a hallmark of the district; some participants reported moving to District 112 specifically for the program. Fine arts programming was also mentioned in both groups.
- While most participants agreed that providing students with opportunities to use and learn technology is important, some attendees stated that "curriculum and programming need to come first." There was also a concern voiced that students are not taught how to properly use technology beyond emailing and games.
- Programming desires voiced by some working parents who participated include an after-school care program and more extracurricular after-school opportunities. Some participants raised the concern that not all buildings are ADA compliant. There was concern voiced around a lack of differentiated programming, both for students with special needs and for gifted students.

**10. Prior to the district's creation of the middle school campus model upon which the previous referendum was based, a superintendent's committee came up with a**

**model in which the three middle schools would be reduced to two. Would you support such a plan? Why or why not?**

- Some participants expressed that the one middle school model was a well-considered idea, while others expressed that the model was pursued for the sake of innovation, rather than the need for reconfiguration and efficiency of resources. Supporters of the model admittedly did some research, by reading current educational research and attending district forums, according to their statements. Current and past teachers who participated spoke to having taught in a 5-8 building, and attested to there being no academic or social issues with this model. While some of the communal concern from participants stemmed from fifth and eighth graders mixing, those in favor of the one-school model stated the grades would be split by sections of the building.
- A two-school model was supported by many participants, who expressed or agreed that there is no physical need for three middle schools. Concern arose around where to erect these schools, to ensure there is no unintended split of socioeconomic groups or races. Another concern with two middle schools was around equity. The majority of participants agreed that each school would need to have the same academic, extracurricular and facilities resources to provide equity for all children and families. One solution offered by a participant to alleviate these concerns is to offer a Grades 5/6 middle school, and a Grades 7/8 junior high school. This could help ensure that no boundaries are perceived to have been erected along racial or socioeconomic lines. A follow-up question arose around whether it is healthy to have students together from Grades 5-12, or if students should be split up at some point to facilitate emotional and social growth. There was no consensus around this question.

**11. Would you support a solution in which the elementary schools are paired regionally with a neighboring school so that kids go to one school for K-2 and the other school for 3-5 in order to provide more classes per grade in each building?**

- “We have really good schools now; this would be a great opportunity, though, to go to the next level.” This quote exemplifies how most participants felt around this issue. The majority spoke to the benefits of resource sharing, teacher collaboration, and more students to build relationships with.
- “Children like consistency. They have enough anxiety from grade to grade. Changing buildings arbitrarily doesn’t make sense.” This quote was stated by one parent who felt grouping buildings by grade level would have a negative effect on young children. A few parents were adamant in their opposition to this solution, expressing the belief that this approach would not support students’ social and emotional needs. One participant countered these concerns, stating, “Children are much more resilient than we think, and if they are traveling with the same cohort each year, even to a new building, they will feel supported and stable.”
- Participants who identified themselves as having children in different grade levels voiced concern that it would be more difficult for parents to drop off and pick up their children from multiple buildings.