

June 2017 Focus Groups Report

**North Shore School District 112
Reconfiguration 2.0 Community Team
June 21-23, 2017**

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Executive Summary: The following report provides summary data and analysis from the three focus group discussions held at the North Shore School District 112 Green Bay administrative offices in Highland Park, Illinois on June 21, 22, and 23, 2017. There were 42 total participants across all three discussions. To ensure the best possible mix of perspectives in each focus group, participants were screened for their relationship to the district as non-parents (taxpayers), school district employees, or parents of past, current, and future district students; age and ethnicity, neighborhood of residence, and level of knowledge on the Reconfiguration 2.0 process. Family of current Reconfiguration 2.0 Team members and Board of Education members were removed from consideration for participation in the focus groups.

Recruitment methods included an early June mailer to 13,500 households in the district, placement of ads in the Highlander and Landmark, outreach during community forums on June 7 and 8, 2017, and phone-based outreach. More than 100 individuals expressed interest in participating in the focus groups.

There were two primary objectives of these discussions: (1) Refine the 2.0 Team's understanding of the most important community priorities for the future of D112, and (2) Test the viability of the eight models for configuration and gauge reactions to various components of those models to further inform the recommendation to be made to the Board of Education.

Key Takeaways

The majority of focus group participants support a change. They want North Shore School District 112 (D112) to remain competitive regionally and nationally, and they want to ensure that all students throughout the district have consistent and equitable access to educational opportunities. We also heard that many families moved to the district because of the schools (and unique programs like the dual language program). They are concerned that D112 cannot compete with neighboring districts if the status quo is maintained.

Models B, D, and E were seen by participants as the most "reasonable" options, representing a compromise not found in the other models. These models were also seen as the best return on investment given the cost of the proposed improvements. The only occasional exception was Model B, which was criticized for high projected cost.

Other than the frequency of grade level transitions and the challenges to dropping off and picking up students in families with multiple children, **the grade center concept presented in Model D was positively received.**

While praised as a more "equitable" option, Model C was not positively received overall. A single middle school was a non-starter for many participants, citing concerns that it bears too much resemblance to the previous referendum, while also carrying too high a price tag. Participants did not like the elimination of schools in the southeast part of the district.

Participants expressed that Models F, G, and H were a continuation of the status quo, with many mentioning that these options are essentially “kicking the can down the road.” Model H was referred to as a replication of BDR3.

Model A was seen as cost prohibitive and too much change for the community to support. There were also claims that Model A was too similar to the failed referendum.

Several focus group participants made the comment that they are looking to the board for leadership in making a tough decision. Many participants stated that they want action to be taken soon.

Multiple participants commented on the need for greater communication to less engaged individuals, particularly those who don’t currently have children in the district and non-English speaking residents of the district. Participants in all three focus groups were concerned about a lack of reliable information about voting procedures and what changes to schools would actually look like, leading to the spread of misinformation. Some residents asked for more proactive communication from the board to explain basic information that many members of the community do not know.

Focus Group Questions

What have you learned during the Reconfiguration 2.0 process?

- Attendees expressed that there is a lot of information to consider, and at the heart of Reconfiguration 2.0 is a communications and outreach challenge to ensure that as many people are aware of the process and their options as possible. At the same time, participants recognized the value of engagement, suggesting, “If you want to have a voice, you have to show up, and not just comment on Facebook.”
- Participants acknowledged that the issues are far more complex than they originally thought. Once they understood that, they wanted to invest more time into learning and understanding the constraints and challenges more fully.
- Attendees noted that everyone wants a better future for the children in D112, but many people don’t want to be directly impacted by the changes that will take place. This was noted as the source of much of the potential divisiveness of the proposed changes.
- Participants noted that it is much easier to oppose specific elements of a proposal than to support a holistic solution. Focus group attendees also offered that there will be sacrifices made by all, and there is no perfect solution.
- Attendees expressed that Reconfiguration 2.0 has raised fundamental questions about the goals of education. Without a clear goal for education in D112, participants said, it’s hard to express preferences about the future of the district.
- Participants brought up the fact that, after a year of engagement by the 2.0 Team, there is a good amount of progress and enthusiasm and that the momentum should be maintained. One participant was “appalled at how things have been punted for so long,” and urged a decision, even a “mediocre decision,” at this point.

We learned during the engagement process that our community prioritizes providing an equitable and high-quality education for our children. What does equity mean to you?

- Participants expressed that equity is about access to opportunity, including educational resources, technology, facilities quality, programming and more. At the same time, participants mentioned that equity does not mean “the same,” as some children require a different set of support structures to be set up for success.
- Attendees noted that full ADA compliance, fire safety, and air conditioning in all buildings are core to an equitable outcome for all buildings.
- Participants noted that equity is also related to competitiveness and ensuring that D112 children have as much opportunity as children in other districts to succeed in their academic experience and beyond.
- Attendees suggested that equity would be undermined by putting some programs (like dual language) only on certain sides of town, treating some schools differently than others (for example, splitting some schools in half), or by having some students travel across the district to get to their school while others only have to travel a short distance.
- Participants offered that not all schools need to be provided the same exact financial treatment to ensure equity. Different buildings have different maintenance needs and different cost requirements as well as different staffing plans. Moreover, teachers do not need to work from the same exact curriculum all the time, and should retain the freedom to use the style and approach that suits them and their students best.
- Attendees suggested that there isn’t a high level of understanding on the dual language program, and this leads to misinformation and distrust that threaten perceptions of equity. Some stated that dual language students are seen by members of the community as completely separate from the rest of the school or that these students are exclusively native Spanish speakers. At all three focus groups, 2.0 Team members provided additional information about dual language programs.

Discussion of Models by Group: Models A, B, and C

Overall Reactions

- Attendees did not like the cost estimates assigned to Models A, B, and C, repeatedly saying that they were too high. This, in turn, would likely present a serious obstacle to passing a referendum.
- The blanket reaction to Models A, B, and C is that they would be highly disruptive, since they propose the most change relative to the other models proposed.
- Participants expressed concern with the idea of placing all dual-language programs in one area of the district.
- Some attendees expressed that they were hesitant to offer opinions on any of the models until they could understand how the boundaries would be redrawn.
- A few participants suggested that Models A, B, and C accomplish the goal of reducing the number of buildings in the district, which is one of the most important objectives at present.

Model A

- Participants were very wary of the feasibility of Model A based on financial impact and sustainability. They noted that it seems hard to ask for community support when you're telling people that you have too much space and too few students, but you're proposing to build two new schools.
- Some attendees noted that there is a strong contingent of people who want Ravinia and Braeside to remain open, and that may pose a direct challenge to support for Model A.

Model B

- Model B was praised by some attendees for the number of buildings and the fairness of the geographic distribution proposed. It was also highlighted as a model of compromise, as “everyone gives up a little” in this option.
- Participants who supported Model B noted that there are challenges in the number of transitions, potential equity concerns, and high cost estimates. There was a mixed response to the idea of rolling 5th graders into middle school.

Model C

- Though Model C was praised as an efficient or an equitable option, the single middle school concept was suggested to be a “non-starter” for too many people in the district. According to some, this is exacerbated by the extreme level of change proposed by the model.
- Attendees noted that the five-building plan provides the opportunity for long-term operational savings not offered by other models.
- Participants noted that Model C bears too much resemblance to the most recent referendum that failed, and putting something like that forward for consideration on the ballot would almost ensure defeat.
- Model C was met with skepticism by some attendees, as it “eliminates all of the schools in the southeast part of the district” and also leaves limited flexibility should there be significant enrollment shifts in the future.

Discussion of Models by Group: Models D and E

Overall Reactions

- Attendees praised both Models D and E as “moderate” or “compromise” solutions. The number of buildings included as well as the geographic distribution of buildings within the plan were met with positive responses. Both models were praised for the number of sections as well as the amount of change proposed with the new building configurations.
- The number of transitions was commented on by a number of attendees. For some, there seemed to be an academic cost to the number of transitions. Others expressed that there is a benefit to the social development of children who get to spend time with students of mostly the same age. Beyond concerns regarding specialized play equipment and

libraries, attendees did not articulate a positive or negative argument around the transitions as they relate to the physical buildings.

- Participants saw both Model D and E as financially feasible, with middle-of-the-road cost estimates and capacity to generate operational savings over time.
- There was some discussion by participants of the traffic impact of building-out Northwood and Wayne Thomas, and the congestion that would result during morning commute time.
- Attendees saw a significant benefit to keeping eight buildings open to appease those residents in the district who want to see schools near their homes, but there was some concern about the inefficiency and the financial sustainability of retaining that many buildings in the future.

Model D

- The grade center concept proposed in Model D was received positively by most focus group participants. The negative reactions came mostly from participants who perceived difficulty in coordinating pickups and drop-offs for families with multiple children at different schools.
- A few attendees expressed skepticism of the benefit of keeping K-2 sections by themselves. The increase in transitions seemed to promote a lack of permanence, consistency, or familiarity for students that would need to change buildings every three years.
- A few focus group participants with monolingual students expressed concern that there were not as many monolingual sections in the north part of the district in Model D.

Model E

- Participants acknowledged that the limited number of grade transitions in Model E presented the opportunity for younger students to have an older “buddy,” which was seen as a benefit to the feeder patterns in this model.
- The spread of dual language programs to both the north and south of the district in Model E was viewed as a better approach than the geographic distribution of dual language in Model D.

Discussion of Models by Group: Models F, G, and H

Overall Reactions

- Participants reacted to these models in a largely negative way, with some indicating that the likelihood of building broad community support for any of the three is somewhat limited. The lack of real change proposed by these models was seen by many as “kicking the can down the road.”
- One participant noted, and many agreed, that Models F, G, and H are low cost options for those that “don’t want to spend any money” and “don’t care about educational quality.”

- For some attendees, Models F, G, and H do not do enough to address equity concerns related to the treatment of the north and south areas of the district.
- There was a significant amount of dialogue on the value and role of dual language programs in D112 during the discussion of Models F, G, and H. Though managing and distributing dual language programs was viewed as a challenge, the overall sentiment among participants was that the dual language option added immense value to the district.
- Attendees did not like the idea that the two monolingual sections at Wayne Thomas would be the only monolingual sections to continue on during middle school at Northwood.

Model F

- Model F was referred to by one participant as “an experiment using our children as subjects.” Another participant made reference to D112 serving as a “guinea pig” in the future proposed by this model.
- Though praised for minimizing change by some attendees, others indicated that equity concerns would present problems for community support should this option be put forth for approval by the board.

Model G

- Because of the number of buildings retained in Model G, many participants saw this option as the weakest, given the financial reality of the district at present. Of this model, one participant said, “It seems like we’re just going to come back and ask for more money later.”
- Attendees indicated that money spent to maintain old and failing buildings in Model G would have been better spent on developing new facilities. In addition, the staffing needs for 10 buildings would present significant financial constraints on the district moving forward.

Model H

- Model H was criticized for the resemblance it bears to BDR3, prompting many to dismiss it as a viable option given the lack of community support it would likely garner.
- Some participants indicated that an eight-building plan is desirable for the amount of change introduced, though the buildings included in the plan may not be optimal.

Do you have any other information you would like to share with the 2.0 Team to consider?

- Attendees reiterated the importance of moving forward quickly, and that a decision should be made soon even if it doesn’t represent the perfect solution.
- Some participants suggested that the referendum would have a much higher likelihood of passing if school closings were decoupled from the call for a bond. There was a belief that many more people would vote no if the vote included a decision to close schools.

- Though many attendees indicated that communication has improved significantly since the last referendum, many stressed the need for greater communication to more residents within the district, particularly the 80% of Highland Park residents who do not currently have children in schools. That requires a continued community engagement effort after the 2.0 Team makes its recommendation to the board, as well as concerted effort to get the word out in the weeks leading up to a referendum vote.
- Participants indicated that future iterations of the models under consideration need to include operational costs built out and a more robust explanation of benefits offered in each scenario.
- Some attendees expressed that there will need to be a spokesperson with a strong voice about the vision put forth by the board, and that success will come from a solid information sharing effort about how the option on the ballot is different than the one that came before.
- Participants shared an interest in the 2.0 Team providing the board with a “Plan B” backup (or series of backup plans) that would incorporate a phased approach, an option that works without a referendum, or an option that requires a significantly smaller bond amount.
- Attendees indicated that, no matter what option is ultimately chosen, the board should show explicitly how they listened to the community and responded directly to the preferences and priorities expressed during the engagement process carried out by the 2.0 Team.