

### MEMORANDUM

March 18, 2014

To: Superintendent Kate Maguire

From: Barb Olson, School/Community Relations Director

Re: **Feedback regarding final recommendation to reconfigure grades districtwide as preK/K-5, 6-8, 9-12**

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### **Background**

Following the December 17, 2013 School Board work session at which you presented your preliminary recommendation to reconfigure grade spans districtwide, we developed a communication plan in order to:

- Inform staff, families and community members regarding the concept of grade reconfiguration and opportunities to learn more;
- Solicit feedback that could help inform future conversations on this topic.

Feedback was gathered in four key ways:

- 1) Three community information sessions (Maple Grove Senior High, Jan 13; Osseo Senior High, Jan 16; Park Center Senior High, Jan 22);
- 2) Two optional information sessions for staff (Jan 9, Jan 14);
- 3) WeListen email address;
- 4) Online feedback form accessed via the district website (linked from article on same topic).

The feedback opportunities were promoted through the district's parent e-newsletter; Sun Post newspapers; the district website; the employee e-newsletter; and the district's Facebook page.

This information was summarized for the school board for its February 10, 2014 work session. Following the presentation of your final recommendation, which had been revised to reflect staff and community feedback, some additional feedback was received. The additional messages have been shared in their entirety with the school board, and this memo has been updated accordingly.

### **Participation**

*Preliminary recommendation (December 2013 through early February 2014)*

Approximately 250 people total attended the community information sessions, with the majority (more than 200) attending the first session, held at Maple Grove Senior High.

About 20 staff members attended the optional employee sessions.

Nearly 30 email messages specific to districtwide grade configuration were received through WeListen prior to the March 4 work session at which the final recommendation was presented.

The online tool was not a survey; it had no controls on participation, and cannot be viewed as statistically reliable or valid. However, the feedback submitted did offer a glimpse of how some people in our community think about the idea of grade reconfiguration.

Nearly 160 total written responses were submitted through the above feedback options. The majority of them were from parents of students enrolled in our schools, although we did hear from some students, staff, and community members.

*Final recommendation (March 4-16, 2014)*

Since the final recommendation was presented on March 4, ten (10) more messages related to grade configuration have sent by email or were shared on the district’s Facebook page.

**Fairly equal representation of strongly supportive and strongly opposed**

*Preliminary and final recommendations*

A relatively small number of responses came in at the extreme ends of full support or complete opposition.

Some were fully in support and would like to move forward without delay. Key themes among supporters were that reconfiguration would serve 9<sup>th</sup> graders well, would align our district with the majority of other metro districts, and would provide more academic and cocurricular/extracurricular opportunities for 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students.

Others were extremely opposed. The majority of this group felt that 6<sup>th</sup> graders and 9<sup>th</sup> graders were not developmentally ready to advance to the next level. Some worried about the transition for their child, particularly when it could mean missing out on the key transition points for 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, respectively—things like serving on school patrol, going to Valleyfair, participating in boat races, etc.

**Most common response: “Yes, but....”**

By far, the most common response was along the lines of, “Yes, I support the overall idea, but I have concerns about how it would be implemented.”

*Preliminary recommendation comments*

The potential impact on boundaries was the most critical concern. Many support the move to a 9-12 secondary grade configuration but if doing so would mean changes to high school boundaries, they would withdraw their support. They noted that high school affiliation begins in younger elementary grades and that it would be too disruptive to their children to change that affiliation and potentially be parted from friends who would go to a different high school. Many said they purchased their homes specifically so their child could attend a particular high school and they would under no circumstances consider any other school. This theme was particularly strong in the responses from families whose children either currently or will attend Maple Grove Senior High.

There was a strong desire to find a way to reconfigure grades without requiring high school boundary changes. Some suggested adding onto Maple Grove Senior High instead of (or in addition to) Osseo Senior High. A number of respondents wanted the district to offer other options that would allow 9<sup>th</sup> graders to move into high school without adjusting boundaries.

Many noted that they could not weigh in on the concept of grade reconfiguration without more information about the related boundary changes. While they recognize the idea has merit, they cannot support it without knowing if their family would be affected by any boundary change that could accompany grade reconfiguration.

*Final recommendation comments (March 4-16, 2014)*

Comments received from staff and community members on the final recommendation were small in number and covered a variety of perspectives. One was opposed to the tax impact; one suggested finding other ways, such as eliminating preschool programs, to find space at the elementary level; two writers noted that they would welcome a high school boundary change if it meant they could be assigned to the high school of their choice; one wondered how the additions would be paid for; one fully supported grade reconfiguration while another fully opposed it; one highlighted how adding space to each high school would perpetuate racial and socio-economic disparities; one focused on transitions for sixth grade teachers; and a final message inquired about the impact of high school space additions on special education programming.

**Other themes that arose through feedback on the preliminary and/or final recommendation**

*Transitions for students*

Some urged careful attention to the types of activities that serve as rites of passage for 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders so that those students wouldn't miss out if grade reconfiguration occurs. A number of comments also called out the need to ensure that transitions are as smooth as possible for specific programs.

*Transitions for staff*

A key theme during the staff information sessions, and for some of the parents/guardians who commented, was to ensure smooth transitions for teachers. Licensure requirements and the teacher transfer process were key areas of interest.

*Open enrollment policy/procedure*

Since the need to create sufficient space was a key element of the grade configuration discussion, many respondents commented on the district's open enrollment policy. Some suggested that open enrollment be closed at some or all schools in order to alleviate overcrowding.

*PreK programming in elementary schools*

Some respondents questioned why the district offers preschool programming and if cutting back on those programs would help alleviate the space crunch at some elementary schools.

*Want to see other options*

Some either offered or requested other options that would accomplish reconfiguration without boundary changes or adding onto a single high school.

*Financial considerations*

A smaller number of comments focused on finances. Some suggested spending more money to add space at both Maple Grove Senior High and Osseo Senior High, while others wondered if the costs of districtwide grade configuration would outweigh the benefits.

*Timeline*

Some respondents wondered about what appeared to be an aggressive timeline and suggested that the district take more time to develop and implement a potential reconfiguration plan.

**Summary**

The final recommendation and the implementation planning that will take place pending its approval respond to key themes that arose in the feedback submitted from December 2013 through mid-March 2014:

- By creating space at the three comprehensive high schools, no boundary changes will be required in order to implement new grade spans.
  - *Note:* While no boundary changes are required to implement the preK/K-5, 6-8, 9-12 grade spans, staff will continue to monitor enrollments at all schools to identify any need for boundary adjustments that may be necessary due to enrollment pressures. These boundary adjustments, while not related to grade configuration, will continue to be necessary from time to time in order to make the most effective and efficient use of existing school facilities.
- Special attention will be given to transitions for students and staff.
- Funding will be arranged with a watchful eye on tax impact. For example, the lease levy increase for building additions would be \$18 per year for the typical homeowner in our district. The repurposing of space will be accomplished with zero (\$0) tax impact on property owners.
- The planning timeline will allow significant time for design of the middle school model and related staff development.