

If the referendum doesn't pass, year-round school is on the horizon

During the last Worthington Schools bond referendum in 2016, the board didn't really have a good answer to what would happen if the referendum was not approved. As it turns out, the answer was that we renewed a community process to determine a new plan, and now the board will run another referendum in February.

This time, the school board decided we needed to have a firm answer to the question. We've been discussing this for the last few months, including a long meeting in December where the board approved a resolution identifying "plan B." It isn't something I or the rest of the board hopes we will ever have to implement, because it will have a negative effect on the educational system, and will have a long-term impact that could take years to correct. However, of the options that we looked at, this one, we believe, creates the least negative impact for students.

Plan B

In the short-term, the district would continue to make adjustments that began as long ago as 2008 to adjust to growing enrollment. We've added on to schools, increased some class sizes, repurposed spaces (some far from ideal) for classrooms, and altered student schedules, among many others. During the next two school years, we would continue to increase class or section sizes at all levels.

In the long-term, the district would turn our traditional model of education services on its head by changing student schedules and implementing year-round school. We would implement year-round school starting at the elementary in 2020-2021, then middle school, then high school. This would take at least a year of planning, explanation and addressing potential barriers.

There are serious drawbacks to this plan, especially in the long-term. Changing the schedule would allow us to fit more students in the existing buildings by utilizing all our space all day long throughout the year. This does nothing to address cramped common spaces like hallways, the cafeteria, gyms, etc.

A year-round school schedule, in theory, allows us to fit more students into existing buildings as not all students would attend classes at the same time – 25% of the students would be off for three months, rotating through each season of summer, fall, winter, and spring, while 75% are in school. There are many issues that would require significant work with students, staff, and community members to iron out details for this plan to work for everyone. This is not a practice found in Minnesota currently, so we would have to look across the country and the world for examples to learn from and spend significant time and resources to develop what we hope would be a workable plan. Without knowing the details, it is hard to estimate costs, but certainly our operating costs would increase because of the need to hire more employees, increased transportation costs, and other operational impacts that have not been determined yet. Over time, we fear the general fund balance would decrease, resulting in increased class sizes and fewer educational opportunities for students.

Many other negative impacts to the system can also be foreseen, such as making room for daycare, changing of district priorities/goals, loss of opportunities for students, transportation, and the probable

loss of time for after school/summer school programming which is when students who are behind have a chance to catch up.

Options Considered

The board asked principals, program directors, and the superintendent to research ways of accommodating increased enrollment and they held lengthy discussions to develop a list of 17 possible actions in a Space Action Plan (available at www.isd518.net) and provided the list with recommendations to the school board. From that list the school board held lengthy discussions to determine which actions to accept. The board also reviewed a list of changes that have already been made.

Please note that, while the school board adopted “plan B” outlining what the district would do if the referendum is not approved by voters, the actions identified will need much more significant evaluation. The actions will evolve as research is completed or/and other options are identified.

The bottom line is that we are 200+ students over the design capacity of our current buildings right now, and we are growing at a rate of four new classrooms of students (100 students) each year. We are required by law to educate all children who walk through our doors, and we must find some place to put these students. Our proposal to build a new high school and reconfigure grades across existing buildings was judged by a committee that included community members as the most long-term cost-effective solution to solve space issues. It would preserve our current student programming and provide adequate, appropriate educational learning space for our children.

I urge you to seek more information about the referendum and ask us your questions. Feel free to contact us at info@isd518.net or by phone at 507-372-2172 with any questions, and to attend building tours on January 10 and 11, and an open house with presentations on January 23.

Linden Olson, ISD 518 (Worthington) School Board Member