

Recommendations for Moving Forward

Committee on School Restructuring

Report for the Lansing School District Board of Education

December 15, 2011



Committing to restructuring a district that must reduce its expenditures by closing schools, while still meeting the needs of all of its students, is one of the most difficult decisions a Board of Education will ever have to make. These are decisions that have long-lasting effects on a community and can engender disappointment among those most affected by the decision.

Our committee had this challenge as well: Reduce district expenditures by \$2 million by restructuring schools into configurations that would enable the closing of schools.

In the eight weeks since these community conversations were convened, participants grappled with this challenge. The committees first developed **eleven principles** that guided their conversations and kept them all on track to maximize the focus. These are principles that the committee believes the Board should also consider as it makes its restructuring choices. This document represents the best of the committee's thinking for a vision for the future.

Decision-making Process

Two principles address the process for making these urgent and difficult choices:

1. First establish long-term goals toward which short-term decisions can align
2. Use the district's academic program vision to shape facilities/finance decisions

Academic Program Vision

Seven principles propose priorities for an "academic program vision" capable of shaping facilities/finance decisions. These commitments are critical regardless of which facilities/finance choices are made; without them, no facilities/finance decisions can solve the district's problems. On the other hand, knowing the board's commitment to these (or alternative) principles will allow the technical/feasibility analysis of facilities/finance options to point toward a coherent whole.

3. Invest more heavily in early learning
4. Focus learning on critical and creative thinking skills
5. Work in small, "human-scale" communities
6. Prioritize continuity and relationships
7. Redefine leadership expectations
8. Clearly define quality teaching and make assignments strategically
9. Review and streamline administrative operations

Two principles shape our restructuring options, so we believe the board should test its agreement about them and go on record about them before directing technical/feasibility analysis of the options:

10. Continue to offer thematic options, and more rigorously evaluate the added value of elevating those themes to "magnets"

11. Minimize transitions in order to counter high mobility

Restructuring Concepts

Based on these principles, the committee has outlined the following restructuring concepts:

1. **Structural and grade configuration options for thematic, elementary, and middle school** grades suggesting that technical and feasibility analysis should proceed to determine implementation specifics.
2. **Close one high school** - The committee was unable to find objective criteria that point to which high school should be closed and therefore is recommending that a thorough financial and feasibility analysis be completed before a final decision is made.

Decision-making Principles

The urgency of the district's situation will tempt the board – as it powerfully tempted our committees – to dive directly into arguing the pro's and con's of specific facilities choices proposed by various advocate groups. ***We believe this would be a mistake.***

Our first two principles argue that instead, the board needs to take time to establish its own vision, so that it can inform not only the immediate financial and facilities decisions, but also search criteria for the upcoming superintendent selection and the 2012-13 planning that needs to start in a matter of weeks.

The district's facilities and financial crises grow from its inability to date to respond quickly and creatively to persistently declining enrollment (in some part due to structural economic shifts and in some part to disaffected families choosing other options). **Restructuring facilities alone will not solve Lansing's school problems, help children learn or re-engage alienated families. At best, a restructuring solution will buy back lost breathing room to address the question of what needs to be done INSIDE the facilities.** Unless facilities decisions are made in the service of a coherent, sustained academic vision, we'll be back at this table in five years cutting another percentage from the district's budget and infrastructure. The alternative – that in those five years, the district has:

1. established a compelling identity
2. raised student achievement significantly
3. solved the middle and high school culture problems
4. stabilized its finances.

This is possible only if this board gathers together around an academic vision, and then makes its hard choices about facilities, finance, and superintendent in service of that sustained vision.

Principle 1 - The district should adopt goals for its long-term vision and strategy that can be sustained over time.

The goals that should guide this long-term direction include:

- a) Dramatic improvement in **student achievement** far beyond “adequate yearly progress” to support most, if not all, of our students achieving college and career-readiness as measured by nationally normed tests, starting from wherever they are when they come to us. This includes closing disparities/gaps in results among our populations. (Some examples of current Lansing Schools gaps include African American Students, Asian Students, LEP, Disadvantaged, Students with Disabilities).
- b) Establishment of a **safe and orderly culture** that engages students and staff alike in sustaining focused learning and respectful, inclusive behavior.
- c) Stabilization of the district's **financial condition** by ensuring a sustainable income/expense ratio and replenishing the fund balance to generally accepted accounting practices.

A steady commitment to and visible progress toward these goals in the next two years is critical in rebuilding the public trust in school governance and administrative leadership necessary to galvanize community commitment to the long-term vision.

WHY A LONG-TERM VISION IS IMPORTANT: Continuity of focus is essential to rebuild the trust needed to move our schools to a sustainable future. The vision needs to be crystal clear because the district has massive change to accomplish, and none of the changes involved are “short-term” fixes.

RECOMMENDATION:

By the end of January, the Board should discuss and formally adopt or reject these **eleven guiding principles**. In the light of its principles, it should then adopt or modify the **thematic, elementary and middle school structural options** identified in this document, and direct staff to determine the feasibility and cost savings of the right-sizing strategy embedded in each option. ***The Revenues and Expenditures subcommittee is willing to accept the charge to add a business case analysis to the pro’s and con’s of both high school alternatives by January 1 to guide the board’s choice between them.***

Principle 2 - Right sizing facilities is essential; these decisions about grade configurations, geographic locations, feeder patterns, and building improvements must flow from the district’s academic vision.

WHY RIGHT-SIZING IS IMPORTANT: Long-term enrollment decline has left us with roughly half the number of students our facilities used to accommodate. Every year we fail to adjust facility capacity, we spend scarce funds on maintenance and operating costs, reducing money available to our core tasks of teaching and learning. We may also invest in building improvements that may be lost whenever the downsizing eventually does occur.

WHY THE TECHNICAL/FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS SHOULD FOLLOW – NOT LEAD – THE ACADEMIC VISION CHOICES: Our facilities subcommittee was able to inspect several buildings that have been considered for cost-saving closures, and identified several factors that should be included in the technical/feasibility analysis. However, these differences are relatively minor, and the overall reality is that our operating buildings are generally at comparable levels of maintenance needs, technology investment and condition. Letting the technical factors drive the facilities choices fails to signal the commitment to changed academic and culture which our conversations identify as the critical component of rebuilding district identity and trust.

RECOMMENDATION:

The board should direct both staff undertaking technical/feasibility analysis and the Revenue/Expenditure subcommittee undertaking business case analysis for the high school option to maximize the Academic Vision principles identified below as they complete their assignments.

Principles that Guide the Academic Vision

Participants in the community conversation asked ourselves what it would take to bring us confidence that the district was capable of accomplishing the difficult goals identified in Principle 1. We have identified seven principles that we believe to be consistent with current educational thinking about best practice. But – perhaps even more important – board adoption of (and sustained attention to) these seven principles also would signal to us as community members that **“business as usual”** has been replaced by an intention to revive a district we can take pride in ... a district that will attract others who want what we’re doing here.

Principle 3 - The District will invest more heavily in its youngest learners – 3 and 4 year olds as well as early elementary students.

WHY EARLY ELEMENTARY INVESTMENT IS IMPORTANT: Our district demographics make it clear that without intensive, early emphasis on literacy, we will be unable to achieve academic achievement in later elementary or secondary levels. Further, the massive remediation efforts required if learners miss the developmental window for reading skills will be much more expensive than investing in early years.

RECOMMENDATION:

As many buildings as possible should be structured to include pre-school classrooms. Pre-school and Developmental Kindergarten should be offered to as many 3 and 4 year olds as we can recruit [by offering it to all families, whether Great Start Readiness Program eligible or not]. State aid allocations need to be adjusted so that elementary students are using more of their own foundation allowance, and subsidizing secondary students at a lower rate, even if this means traditional options are less available at secondary grade levels.

Principle 4 - The District will define “academic success” as beyond basic performance and emphasize critical, creative, independent thinking and problem-solving skills as part of its college-and-career-readiness intention.

WHY EMPHASIS ON THINKING SKILLS IS IMPORTANT: Our commitment to our students must go far beyond state-defined baseline “proficiency” measurements required for adequate yearly progress if our students are to be ready for full citizenship. A focus on deep thinking skills is characteristic of districts whose students excel rather than merely “passing.” Getting concrete and exemplary about teaching our students how they think now and how to do so more powerfully is how the district will begin to reverse the trend of losing students. In fact, **we believe that a reputation for producing active, disciplined thinkers (scientific, creative, practical problem-solving) is a compelling reason for families to want to move back to Lansing.**

RECOMMENDATION:

Success in emphasizing thinking skill development should be a major criterion for the search committee as a new superintendent is chosen. The new leader should be asked to develop within his/her first 90 days a plan for how the district’s instructional practices will deepen their emphasis on

encouraging active student thinking, making it visible and actively building student competence and confidence. Professional supports will be needed for teachers to develop new practices and make them their own. Students should also be brought into planning for this shift, as it involves their taking more active responsibility for their own learning.

Principle 5 - The District will organize its buildings into human-scale communities: “villages” of 300-500 students together with a dedicated staff team.

WHY SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITIES ARE IMPORTANT: Schools that succeed in establishing safety and order do so by creating a school culture that is relationship rich and deeply accountable to one another. Both behavior management and focused learning become more possible when a community of adults and students is small enough to avoid anonymity and individualize expectations on the basis of mutual knowledge and recognition. Various studies put the ideal number somewhere between 150 and 600, and note that the more economically disadvantaged the population, the smaller the optimal size. Taking community-building seriously and prioritizing work to ensure healthy school cultures is especially important in Lansing because anecdotal evidence suggests perceptions about out-of-control, inappropriate and sometimes violent behavior are a primary reason we lose so many students and families beginning in middle and high school grades.

RECOMMENDATION:

Larger buildings should be structured to establish **schools-within-a-school** whose culture, identity and accountability systems mirror those of smaller buildings. Families and caregivers need to be deliberately welcomed into the school-within-a-school “villages” or “houses.” Increased staff awareness of and sensitivity to diverse family cultures must be accomplished in order to take advantage of smaller learning communities.

Principle 6 - The District will prioritize consistency and sustained relationships.

WHY CONSISTENT, SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT: Young learners need to feel safe and valued in order to focus on learning. Research suggests that students who have ongoing relationships with adults feel a greater sense of school membership, attachment, and involvement including reduced risky behaviors, reduced absentee rates, improved grades, and improved communication and social skills. Staff needs to be reflective of the student body and have an understanding of and embrace each individual’s culture. Students need role models and advocates.

RECOMMENDATION:

Instructional strategies that stabilize a teacher-student relationship over time (i.e., looping and team-teaching) should be adopted, supported and sustained.

RECOMMENDATION:

Family engagement is crucial to improved student achievement. A culturally sensitive environment that values all students and parents/caregivers should be cultivated.

Principle 7 - The District will start fresh to identify, hire, support and hold accountable passionate, inclusive, culturally-responsive, effective building and district leaders

WHY LEADERSHIP QUALITY IS IMPORTANT: Quality of leadership is the consistent factor that distinguishes schools and districts that turn around academic performance. Without gifted, visionary yet pragmatic leaders, good plans fall flat. And without explicit criteria and accountability for this dimension of leadership, hiring and retention strategies mistake “adequate” mechanical performance for the kind of relationship that calls greatness into being.

RECOMMENDATION:

The process for hiring a new superintendent should establish demonstrated success in building healthy school cultures, engaging community partnership, and raising academic performance as part of both selection criteria and performance assessment criteria.

RECOMMENDATION:

The district should establish a competitive process for selecting fresh building leaders by inviting current Lansing educators to make “entrepreneurial” proposals for how they would lead a particular building to excellence in accomplishing stretch-goals set by the district. Current, successful leaders would, of course, be encouraged to submit proposals among others.

Principle 8 - The District will work together to assure that passionate, inclusive, culturally-responsive, effective teachers are placed to best serve children and are held accountable

WHY TEACHER QUALITY AND STUDENT-CENTERED ASSIGNMENT PRACTICE IS IMPORTANT:

Excellent teachers make a difference. Research shows that there is a 39% difference in student achievement between students with “most” effective teachers and “least” effective teachers.

RECOMMENDATION:

Place qualified teachers in positions for which they are best suited taking into consideration subjects, grade levels and culture of the building. Maintain consistency and stability in each building. Provide support and collaboration time for teachers.

Principle 9 - The District will undertake a complete program and operations review to ensure that administrative systems are clear, consistent, efficient and user-friendly.

WHY EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF OPERATIONS IS IMPORTANT: Research indicates that districts can find major efficiency and effectiveness gains when they gather and analyze data about the degree to which administrative services ultimately serve the instructional core (teaching-learning-content). Lansing’s administrative systems were designed to serve a district twice this size, and have not been systematically streamlined or made user-friendly. The potential for both better service and cost efficiency improvements is high.

RECOMMENDATION:

The District should undertake a broad, systematic administrative audit to maximize the power of its resource allocations (time, human and financial resources) for accomplishing progress toward the compelling vision and serving the needs of students.

Where the Academic Vision has Structural Implications

While Principles 3-9 are broadly applicable regardless of the district's building configuration/structure, the Community Conversation also identified two additional principles that we believe point toward different restructuring options. They could be combined, but a clear indication of the relative importance the board assigns to each strategy will be essential as technical/feasibility implementers do their work.

Principle 10 - The district will increase the rigor of its evaluation of its “magnet” program, exploring whether the same benefits could be achieved at less cost by returning to a less-restrictive “theme” approach, without complexities brought by federal definitions of “magnet.”

WHY RE-EVALUATING MAGNETS IS IMPORTANT: We know to date that the magnet programs are popular. We do not know with confidence whether they are achieving their goal of attracting or retaining families to the district, whether student achievement is significantly higher, or whether the identity/culture made possible by their unifying theme yields safer, more orderly schools. Because the high degree of choice inherent in magnet programs involves costly complications in transportation and hampers the predictability necessary for early/stable staff assignments, and because grants which funded the additional costs are no longer available, this strategy may no longer be viable for the district.

WHY THEMES ARE IMPORTANT: Themes draw in students/families by allowing them to choose an interest and focus that best fit their individual student's unique talents, interests and strengths. The theme gives a school's staff a head start on building a cohesive building identity and culture, which heighten focus on learning and minimize behavioral issues and distractions. Themes can be used to increase relevance by pointing toward real-world settings where adults model use of the knowledge and skills being learned.

RECOMMENDATION:

The district should configure its buildings to cluster elementary, middle and high school options (possibly as “schools within schools”) that focus on, and engage students deeply in, particular ways of thinking. For example, whether they are organized as magnets or not, themes could include:

- Visual and Performing Arts
- Global Studies/Language Immersion/International Baccalaureate
- Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)
- Bio/Health Sciences
- Montessori
- Leadership, Law/Government

RECOMMENDATION:

Existing Visual and Performing Arts, IB/Language Immersion, STEM, and Montessori magnet programs should continue provisionally during 2012 – 2013, but without the magnet-imposed cap on STEM enrollment at 500. Pending evaluation, the Law and Government magnet should be suspended.

RECOMMENDATION:

The district should undertake a rigorous evaluation to be completed within six months to determine the financial and academic cost/benefit of magnet features (for example: competitive enrollment, transportation, caps on maximum size and compliance with other federally defined criteria for using the term “magnet”).

RECOMMENDATION:

Based on evaluation results, the district can consider additional magnet programs for a future date, including the reinstatement of the Leadership/Law and Government magnet and/or the establishment of a second Montessori magnet on Lansing’s north side as well as exploring the expansion of thematic focus that encourage partnerships with organizations in our community.

Principle 11 - The District will minimize the number of school transitions a student experiences during his/her K-12 experience.

WHY MINIMIZING TRANSITIONS IS IMPORTANT: Research indicates that transitions (from elementary to middle school or from middle school to high school, for instance ... but also those that happen when a family moves) significantly interrupt learning and can disturb emerging self-esteem and confidence for many students. In Lansing, where the average number of students entering and exiting a building during the year is a bit over half of the fall enrollment (53%) this becomes even more critical, if we are to hold administrators and teachers accountable for students’ academic success.

RECOMMENDATION:

The district should configure its buildings (as illustrated in the next section) to establish as many K-12 options as possible. Where K-12 is not feasible, K-8 or K-6 options should be sought.

RECOMMENDATION:

District-wide scope and sequence curriculum guides should be reinstated to maximize likelihood that a student who moves will be able to re-enter the same curriculum at another location.

Restructuring Options That Reflect Academic Principles

The principles above led the committee to three recommendations for restructuring plans for thematic schools and for comprehensive schools at the elementary and middle school levels. Options A, B and C explain these recommendations. Option D discusses high school choices.

Option A:

❖ Establish K-8 or K-12 campuses for four “thematic” schools

- A K-8 or K-12 STEM program at Rich (with the 500-student cap removed)
- A K-8 or K-12 IB/Language Immersion/Global Studies program at Pattengill
- A K-8 Visual and Performing Arts program at Pleasant View (continuing at Everett)
- A K-8 Montessori program at Wexford

The schools should continue to operate as magnets during the 2012-13 school year, while a rigorous evaluation determines whether the technical status as “magnets” should be retained.

The committee understands that a change of location for the IB programs now housed at Post Oak and Eastern will require re-certification, but believes that the advantages of a single campus and the potential for expanded capacity should weigh heavily in favor of obtaining the necessary recertification.

The committee recommends suspending the Government/Law magnet now housed at Wainwright. The committee recommends that feasibility be determined of beginning a second Montessori K-8 on Lansing’s north side, and reinstating a Government/Law/Public Policy magnet or theme school at some future date in a different location.

Option B:

❖ Establish K-6 elementary programs to the maximum extent feasible, and where that is not feasible, pair PreK-3 buildings with 4-6 buildings.

The committee’s scan of recent research failed to find conclusive evidence that a 6 – 8 grade configuration is better for students than a K – 6 grade configuration. Moreover, Lansing’s family/caregiver opinion was clear in its preference for grouping sixth graders with their elementary counterparts. Everyone agrees that sixth grade is a pivotal transition year; there are advantages to grouping sixth graders with older students, but the disadvantages include a tendency to take on behavioral characteristics of their older peers before they are developmentally ready. And families are responding to this with increased intention to remove their elementary students from the district before facing a 6-8 grade building. Our recommendation therefore points to grouping our sixth graders with other upper elementary students.

- **In the northern section of the city:**
 - Bingham, Cumberland, Fairview, Post Oak, Riddle, Gier Park (PreK-3), Sheridan Road (PreK-3),
 - Otto (Grade 4-6 “school within a school”)
 - Test feasibility of serving children in those eight locations; if possible, close Willow
- **In the southeast section of the city:**
 - Lyons, Forest View, Mount Hope
- **In the southwest section of the city:**
 - Wainwright, Lewton, Averill
 - Test feasibility of serving children in those three locations; if possible, close Elmhurst
- **In the south central section of the city:**
 - Attwood, North, Cavanaugh, Kendon
 - Test feasibility of serving children in those four locations; if possible, close Reo

Option C:

❖ Offer Grade 7-8 middle schools to students who are not part of the thematic K-8 or K-12s:

- **Significant numbers of 7th and 8th graders will be served in thematic buildings:**
 - See Option A: Rich, Patengill, Pleasant View and/or Wexford
- **Remaining 7th and 8th grade students will be served by:**
 - Otto (Grade 7-8 “school within a school”)
 - Gardner (Grade 7-8) with the possibility of two 2 schools within school

While both of these middle schools are large relative to our Academic Vision Principle #5, the buildings are both compatible with what research leads us to believe is an equally effective alternative: “**schools within a school**” have been shown capable of serving the same purpose of establishing human-scale communities of 300-500 students whose staff can establish personalized relationships and a learning-focused culture.

Option D:

❖ Choose either *Everett-Sexton* or *Everett-Eastern* as Lansing’s high school configuration

Current enrollment figures indicate about 3300 students in the Grade 9-12 range, including alternative education learners. The exact number of these who will be served as part of thematic K-12 programs is dependent upon the feasibility/technical analysis of Option A that will be undertaken upon adoption by the Board. But even rough analysis indicates that only two of the district’s three, well-loved high school buildings are needed to accommodate the remaining students. Everett is a

logical first choice for several reasons: for instance, relatively recent construction and strategic location near the south side's student density.

The committee looked for an objective rationale for choosing between Sexton and Eastern, the remaining candidates for closure. What we found were almost entirely speculative and/or subjective arguments for either choice ... accompanied by passionate advocacy on the part of people who love the traditions and identities embodied in each location, and who are committed to traditional constituencies for each location. The choice is a painful one, and while the committee chairs (and their subcommittee attenders) hold personal opinions, counting "votes" among our unscientifically-selected, and un-elected membership seemed less than helpful. What we are able to offer you, our elected representatives instead, is two things:

1) Our compilation of the pro/con arguments we gathered in the course of our subcommittee and chair-committee deliberations:

Pro/Con Arguments

Arguments for Retaining Everett/Sexton (by Closing Eastern)

- This option closes the school whose campus is most exposed to major traffic patterns and commercial businesses and retains the one more integrated into residential zoning (thus minimizing campus security issues, pick-up and drop-off safety concerns and learning distractions ... and maximizing flexibility of future use for younger students). Pro for closing Eastern.
- This option closes the school whose real estate site is more likely to have short-term sale options, maximizing the potential for capturing capital for either needed maintenance/upgrades or for future building replacement. (Note: If the fieldhouse is included in the sale, the district as a whole loses an important asset, not just Eastern. If the fieldhouse is not included in the sale, this argument is weakened.) Pro for closing Eastern.
- This option closes the school which is farthest advanced along the progression of sanctions for failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress, and which is thus in greatest danger of takeover by the state. Pro for closing Eastern.

Arguments for Retaining Everett/Eastern (by Closing Sexton)

- This option capitalizes on the stronger and more organized parent involvement and alumni support that has been enjoyed by Eastern over the last few years. Pro for closing Sexton.
- This option requires fewer students (Sexton's roughly 800) to be disrupted by relocation than the alternative (which would reassign Eastern's roughly 1200 students). Pro for closing Sexton.
- This option would continue the International Baccalaureate program's current high school location. Pro for closing Sexton.

The committee chairs agreed that evaluating the pro's and con's did not yield objective enough evidence to merit the closing of either building. A decision this impactful must have hard evidentiary data to support it. Therefore, the chairs **are recommending** the following action:

2) Commission the Revenues/Expenditures subcommittee to undertake between now and January 1 a "business case" analysis of the two options, testing whether there are cost/benefit considerations that can be projected for the short-term (2012-13), the medium-term (three-five year) and long-term (ten year) future.