



Community Engagement Forums on Small School Funding

Final Report for Board of Education and District Leadership

March 9, 2010

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1. Forum Objectives

Three public forums were held in January and February to engage the PSD community to understand their values related to funding small schools. Forums were heavily promoted, and attendees discussed pros and cons of three approaches as they relate to the education of our children. Presenters emphasized the forums were held to determine community values, and gather input to help make tough choices between competing values.

The input should be useful in a number of ways. The prevalence of certain viewpoints repeated across forums provides a sense of priorities expressed by the public. A summary of themes is listed in Section 4 of this report.

This input should help the Board and district get a sense of public preferences, priorities, and concerns related to funding small schools. While it does not represent the “public voice” as a whole, it does represent the collective opinion of approximately 320 persons who attended 3 community engagement forums.

Panel’s Charge: The 6-member Small School Panel provides the critical external review and makes revisions to the draft report the communications team (including Martin Carcasson, Director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation; and Dwayne Schmitz, PSD Assessment and Research Analyst) have prepared. The communications team presented the panel with themes, a draft report, and the panel will fine tune and add to the report, including their specific comments regarding findings. **Panel members are:** Stephanie Tomasini, parent, represents Poudre High feeder; Tiffany Haag, parent, represents Fossil Ridge High feeder; Rick Hufnagel, parent, represents Rocky Mountain feeder; Susan Benzel, parent, represents Fort Collins High feeder; Linda Hopkins represents community/business; Tom Tonoli, retired educator, represents community and PSD staff.

2. Stakeholder Representation

Approximately 320 persons attended 3 forums held in January and February, and 282 took the electronic keypad survey given following a 30-minute informational presentation, and 1-hour small group session to discuss in-depth each of three approaches or options (see Section 3).

As shown by the keypad survey, attendees represented all areas of the community fairly equally. One area, the mountain communities, was over-represented at the forums with 18% of attendees (given that the three Mountain Schools represent 119 or approx. 1% of PSD’s 11,009 elementary students). The Timnath area community was under-represented, with only one attendee at forums. **The table below shows attendance.** Of attendees taking the survey, **70% are parents** of current PSD students; **33% are PSD staff**; **16% are preschool parents**; **11% are community members** (not parents of current students); and **2% are students** (respondents could select more than one category, so totals equal more than 100%).

Zip Code	Area of PSD	Schools Located in these Zip Codes	No. and % of Attendees
80521	Northwest Fort Collins	Bennett, Dunn, Irish, Lab School, Moore, Putnam, Lincoln, Polaris	26 (9%)
80524	Northeast Fort Collins	Harris, Laurel, Tavelli, Leshar	34 (12%)
80525, 80528	Southeast Fort Collins	Riffenburgh, Shepardson, Werner, Bacon, Kruse, Linton, O’Dea, Traut, Zach, Kinard, Preston, Boltz	80 (28%)
80526	Southwest Fort Collins	Bauder, Beattie, Johnson, Lopez, McGraw, Olander, Blevins, Webber	56 (20%)
80535	LaPorte	Cache LaPoudre Elementary and Middle Schools	10 (4%)
80536, 80545, 80512	Mountain communities	Livermore, Red Feather, Stove Prairie	51 (18%)
80547	Timnath	Bethke, Timnath	1 (0%)
80549	Wellington	Eyestone, Rice, Wellington MS	16 (6%)
Other	Unknown	Unknown	8 (3%)
		Total (who completed the keypad survey)	282 (100%)

3. Input and Data Collected

Three types of data were gathered and analyzed: attendees shared their values, viewpoints and concerns about all three approaches in small group sessions. At the end of small group sessions, each attendee wrote down the “one point they want the Board/district to know about this issue.” Then, attendees used electronic keypads to answer survey questions. Data (for qualitative input) was analyzed using constant comparativeness analysis to determine themes; survey data was generated using software analysis. A fourth type of input—additional input received via e-mail—was reviewed for themes.

After each forum, all input was posted on the PSD website, and a summary of analysis presented in Section 4 of this report. In addition, “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) were posted online to address common questions and misconceptions posed by attendees in small group sessions. Additional input received via e-mail also is posted.

At the first forum, attendees requested clear and specific definitions of the 3 types of small schools. These definitions were provided at the next two forums so attendees could refer to types of small schools in their discussions.

- **Neighborhood schools** – may be under-enrolled due to neighborhood growth cycles, smaller boundaries or attendance areas, and/or students choosing out to other schools.
- **Geographically remote** – located in outlying communities and mountain areas; may be under-enrolled because of a small population in the area to draw from, and/or built to accommodate fewer students.
- **Choice or option schools** – have no neighborhood, boundaries, or attendance areas to draw from; may have low enrollment because of a lack of space available in their current facilities, or small by choice.

In addition, we clarified a misconception expressed at the first forum, that small schools mean small class sizes: Small schools DON'T mean small class sizes, and combining schools would NOT mean larger class sizes, because teachers follow the students to new schools. Class size guidelines are given to schools district-wide, regardless of a school's total enrollment.

4. Summary of Findings and Themes from Approaches, and Decision-Making Advice for the Board and District

Note: Themes below are taken from the following three types of input/data collected, and will be referred to throughout Section 4 by the following numbers in parenthesis showing their source:

- (1) **One Point Each Attendee Wants the Board/District to Know About this Issue** (includes “statements” or quotes from attendees representative of themes)
- (2) **Input from Small Group Sessions** (In the 8 small group discussions held at each forum, participants discussed support and opposition to each of the three approaches.)
- (3) **Electronic Keypad Survey Results**

Advice for the Board of Education and District Regarding Decision-Making:

(1) 36 attendees said the one point they wanted the Board/District to know regarded decision-making:

They said to keep kids first in your decision-making, and make sure decisions are in the best interest of the entire district. Numerous statements urged decisions that focus on the needs of all students, emphasizing this is decision-making during a “hard reality,” and it's important to take action and be fiscally responsive. They said to keep in mind this isn't about closing small schools; it's about being a more efficient and effective school district.

Representative statements:

“It's critical to maintain the district's tradition and reputation for quality education for all students, and use funds as efficiently as possible toward educating all students.”

“The overall quality of education is more important than the specific school or location.”

“Make the tough choices and do what's right for all children. Parents don't always speak for ALL the children.”

“Decisions need to be made—no matter how hard.”

Themes/values related to Approach A: Continue PSD’s current funding model of providing small schools with additional funds, using the small school funding factor. Find other areas/ways to balance the budget.

(1) Support for keeping Mountain Schools (Red Feather, Livermore, Stove Prairie) open:

28 persons specifically referenced support for Mountain Schools, emphasizing families are open to many options—making sacrifices, getting creative with funding—but that closing is a very last resort. Attendees said Mountain Schools should be given special consideration to remain open due to their remote location, the special learning opportunities they provide, long commutes for students, and the overall negative impact of closure to the remote communities, which rely heavily on schools. Comments urged closing inefficient/under-performing schools in Fort Collins first, where students don’t have long commutes, and urged the board to balance the budget by making across-the-board cuts at all schools.

Representative statement: *“Understand that the rural/mountain schools are a separate entity and by closing a mountain school you decimate a community where schools are vital to any growth, and options are limited as compared to in town communities.”*

(1) Support for Approach A overall, keeping all small schools open:

38 individuals urged the board to find other ways to balance the budget to avoid closing small schools, emphasizing that closing small schools would save only a small amount of the \$12 million PSD needs to cut.

Representative statements:

“To me, the most important thing is the importance of funding neighborhood schools. Until the school becomes so small that critical services are not being provided (counseling, specials, etc.)”

“The school district needs to quit thinking that school closures are the answer—this is merely tourniquets to stop the bleeding. The inequities that will come from this will cause further harm down the road.”

“A small school offers support, comfort, and safety to its children’s families’ community.”

(2) Value themes expressed in small groups in support of Approach A convey the sense of community and belonging that neighborhoods, whether remote or in town, provide that unite a community. Supporters of Approach A emphasized that all small schools are not alike, and asked that decision-makers carefully consider the three types of small schools (neighborhood, remote, and choice; see definitions on Page 2). They felt closing schools will disrupt the lives of students and their families and create safety concerns, especially for students with long bus commutes in on mountain roads. Attendees feel students are more successful in small school settings, especially where poverty is a factor, because small schools provide a support system to help students stay in school and succeed.

(2) Value themes expressed in small groups in opposition of Approach A convey the inefficiency of having more than 3,800 “empty seats” in elementary and middle schools, creating long-term problems in a district with enrollment that is not growing. They said this approach isn’t sustainable to keep schools operating at 40-60% capacity open in light of likely budget cuts in future years. Those opposing Approach A also felt that even with the small school subsidy, some small schools currently are unable to provide all the services and programs that large schools can, creating “haves” and “have nots” across the community. In addition, some felt large schools are compensating for small schools, and that we need to maximize resources for all students. Attendees said large schools can also provide students with a sense of belonging.

Themes/Values related to Approach B: Close some small schools and combine students into larger schools.

(1) Recommendations to close, consolidate, or combine schools:

Of the 86 attendees who urged closing/combining of some schools, many said we are not serving our children as well as we should if we continue to fund underutilized schools. They said cuts will become so deep that the quality of education for all students at small and other schools will be diminished. They urged the board to maximize existing dollars for the benefit of all students, which means making the painful decision to close some schools.

Representative statements:

“Please do what’s best for kids (not staff or family neighborhoods or business). I firmly believe that what is best for kids is to receive a full education, which can only be received in a fully staffed school. Combine small schools to meet this need (Mountain schools excluded).”

“For schools within Fort Collins (not Mountain Schools), we need to use our buildings more efficiently so we can: (1) devote more of our resources to the actual education of students; (2) show our voters that we are using our dollars efficiently in hopes of passing a mill levy. That means close or consolidate several elementary and at least one middle school. Mountain schools should be looked at for efficiencies also, but the answers are not as clear given the greater distances involved.”

(1) For guidance about the type of schools to close, attendees recommended: in-town schools where busing distances would be shorter; combining schools with similar philosophies/programs (IB to IB; Core to Core, etc); closing schools with lower academic performance; and when schools are closed, send students to the nearest school with space. Many attendees said that it shouldn’t just be about numbers, but that the quality of schools should be considered. Others said to be sure to have a clear process that helps the children and parents of the impacted schools make their transition as easy as possible.

(1) Overall benefits cited: increasing educational opportunity across the district; retaining teaching positions; keeping smaller class sizes; more money for educating students; ability to offer full specials of music, art, and P.E.; lessening the impact of cuts across all schools; and garnering support for a mill levy/tax increase because taxpayers believe schools are being run efficiently. One attendee said if we equalize school size, we equalize education across the district; another said it would be beneficial to have fewer viable schools rather than more struggling schools.

Representative statements:

“Close small schools—lessen impact on all schools and we will build better, more efficient schools. Focus on the positive; don’t let a few loud and sad voices sway your decision. We will recover and be stronger for it.”

“It is imperative that we act in some sustainable capacity because PSD currently has 6,400 available seats and vital resources are lost on a daily basis to sustain inefficient schools. The focus needs to be on inefficient schools, not small schools.”

“To continue to be one of the best districts in the state, PSD must provide a full curriculum at all age levels (e.g., not just the basics w/no music, tech, etc.), and if that can only be done by consolidating schools, then so be it.”

(2) Value themes expressed in small groups in support of Approach B convey many of the same values stated in opposition of Approach A. Additional themes address the fiscal responsibility of closing some small schools given an astounding number of empty seats, the equivalent of about eight elementary schools. They emphasized it’s not desirable but may be necessary, because we are running out of other areas to make cuts, and said it’s not the entire answer, just a part of it. Supporters said it’s illogical to have 3-4 under-enrolled schools within two miles of each other. They expressed support for combining two similar type schools in one facility, thus closing buildings without eliminating programs, using the “school within a school” concept.

(2) Value themes expressed in small groups in opposition of Approach B convey many of the same values stated in support of Approach A. Additional themes address the negative impact on property values and businesses if schools are closed, concerns about how buildings would be used, if closed (sold, leased or become run down), and difficulty reopening if/when enrollment grows in the area. Many opposing Approach B emphasized the passion people have about their neighborhood/community school, and the anger and emotion that would occur, and that any closure process would take time.

Themes/Values related to Approach C: Find additional ways to support all students across all schools.

(1) Support for Option C, finding additional ways to support students across all schools: Thirteen persons (13) said we need to find additional funds to support programs and schools, because closing schools will not solve this issue completely. Several felt the answer is to work on changing state legislation to assure more spending is directed to education. Attendees expressed hope that the community would make a personal decision to support an upcoming

mill levy/bond issue, and several said the actions of the board/district related to school closure may directly affect the outcome of a mill levy/bond election.

Representative statements:

“With the emphasis on accountability and providing a high quality education to our future generations to prepare them for the 21st century, we need to fund education with a mill levy.”

“New funding streams must be identified and solidified to ensure long-term budget success and insulate further economic downturns.”

(2) Value themes expressed in small groups in support of Approach C stressed finding new, creative ways to fund schools. Supporters suggested “thinking outside the box” ideas such as increasing the use of volunteers, finding ways to generate funds using empty space in under-enrolled schools, increasing student fees, and to consider sponsorship or advertising in gyms and even on school buses. They asked the district to consider sharing best cost-saving practices district-wide with all schools, and closely scrutinizing district-level spending for cost savings. Creative use of school year calendar options were emphasized (4-day week, longer days and fewer overall school days, etc.) for cost savings. Supporters of Approach C said the community needs to pass a local mill levy/bond issue to increase ongoing funds for schools. In addition, they suggested state and federal initiatives such as being vocal and active to get PSD off the lowest state funding level, that lottery funds should be designated for K-12 education, and that PSD should seek federal “Race to the Top” funds to support schools.

(2) Value themes expressed in opposition of Approach C stated the reality of successfully finding new funding sources in today’s economic recession. Attendees said we must find long-term solutions, and that raising taxes may be difficult. Several attendees expressed caution to schools about fund-raising strategies that would benefit just their school, emphasizing that fund-raising only benefits schools in wealthy areas of the community. They hoped that inequities don’t arise from this model, and suggested collecting and equally dispersing fund-raising dollars across all schools to maintain equity.

Support for blending Approaches A, B, and C:

(1) Support for blending all three approaches: In addition, eight (8) individuals urged a blend of all 3 options to address the full complexity of the funding issues. Several individuals recommended specifically combining Lab School and Polaris to create a K-12 Expeditionary Learning school.

Representative statement: *“It will most likely take a carefully constructed combination of all three approaches (with as absolutely little of “B” as possible). More importantly, our district should concentrate on increasing/improving our status at the state level and making as deep of cuts administratively as will be made per school and student.”*

Other Themes/Values Expressed by Attendees (not related to Options A, B, or C):

References to class size and specific instructional areas:

(1) Eight (8) statements referred to maintaining/reducing class size, and preserving high quality instruction, including specific instructional areas of music, art, P.E., technology, media/libraries, literacy, Special Education, English Language Acquisition (ELA), counseling, and students in poverty or at risk.

Representative statements:

“As a teacher, I am very concerned about the funding, as well as my future. I have no answers, but listened carefully to those in my group. I know that this year I have a higher class size, more responsibilities, and have put in long hours trying to give my students the best education I can.”

“While I value specials in our schools and come from a long line of music teachers, I feel strongly that the #1 priority in this discussion needs to be keeping class sizes as small as possible in order to maintain educational integrity that is certain to be weakened by large class sizes.”

References to the impact of School Choice on small school enrollment:

(1) 13 individuals addressed either the importance of or impact of School Choice and specialized schools on the current funding situation: Persons expressed the value of having option schools for children who learn in different ways, and also for traditional schools. Others said choice is causing imbalances in enrollment in schools and

suggested school choice families should pay tuition. Other solutions included having choice and neighborhood schools share facilities to decrease costs. (Note: free access to schools through open enrollment is state law.)

Representative statements:

“Offering different educational approaches and philosophies, as is done in “choice” schools in Fort Collins, should not be sacrificed for financial efficiency.”

“Schools of choice make boundary lines impossible. Different programs (IB, Core Knowledge) are a luxury causing budget problems.”

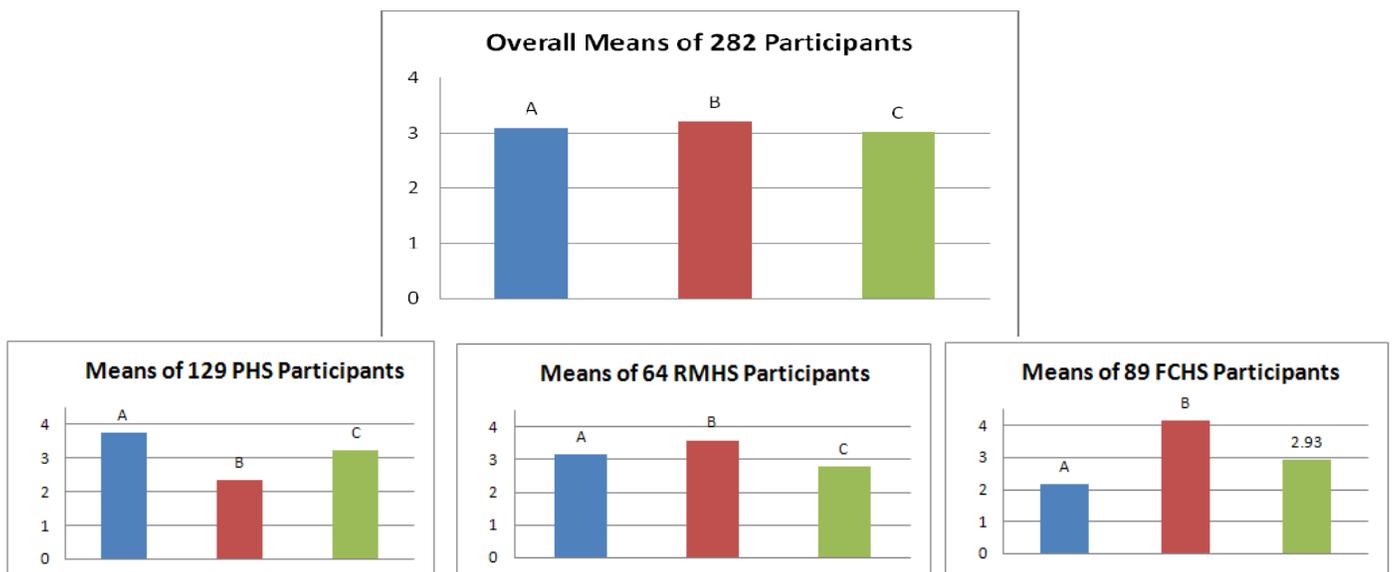
References to other areas for budget reductions:

(1) 14 individuals submitted other areas for budget cuts not related to small schools. These were forwarded to the Budget Advisory Committee through PSD administrators leading the budget development process.

5. Keypad Survey Data

The following graphs represent the average levels of support for each of the three approaches for funding small schools. On the 5-point scale being utilized, a score of 3 indicates a neutral position; a score above 3 indicates a preference for the approach being considered; a score below 3 indicates a lack of support for the approach being considered.

It is evident that respondents’ preferences differ by each of the three forums that were held and that the strongest support for closing small schools came from the FCHS forum while the strongest support for finding ways to fund small schools came from the PHS forum. Approach C appears to have received the least overall support. It is important to keep in mind that differences in opinions expressed through the Small School Forums may reflect news updates between January 26th and February 23rd, as well as geographical differences. Based on the data displayed below, it appears that each approach will have some supporters and others who oppose the option.



6. Additional Comments from Panel

Four years ago, a decision was made not to close schools and now the decision has been made by the school community itself (Moore & Bauder or Polaris & Lab). We sense impatience about how long it’s taking to make these decisions. The community may feel more at ease because they are involved in making the decision that impact their school. Finally, money drove the decision. We value decisiveness.

People are frustrated when they hear that the PSD is at the bottom of the funding curve in the state. They don’t realize we have the same “funding curve” situation in our district with large schools receiving less per student, and small schools receiving more per student.

We heard loud and clear – do something! People want to see action from these committees. Make the tough choices.

Ultimately this will impact all schools. You have to be really thoughtful over time. Today's small schools may be tomorrow's large schools. Plan far in advance when making decisions about schools and school sizes.

Population shifts will not retrieve students for small schools. So, it is unlikely small schools will grow and need to reopen. For schools that are at capacity, those neighborhoods will diminish and become small schools. We have a city plan that exacerbates that.

Some of the ideas in Approach C are realistic and some are unrealistic about funding alternatives.

People are becoming more supportive of closing small schools, with the exception of not closing mountain schools, because of the remoteness and safety concerns related to transportation.

Can we alleviate the reasons why people don't want to close schools? Maximize the good stuff and minimize the bad stuff. Bring the community together to support transitions, if change is necessary.

Don't let funding cuts impact our students' education; protect the sanctity of their education and do it now!!

We should look for ways to mobilize school communities to find their own solutions in the future (citing the Moore/Bauder and Lab School/Polaris initiatives as examples). We should foster this as a part of our process in the future. Mobilize the community to move forward with efforts like this, if they are educated about the impacts of decisions.

If a decision is made to close a school, it's important for the board to go to that school and involve the school community in the solution.

There appears to be the willingness for parents to participate in the conversation about closing schools. Across the district, everyone knows we need to be fiscally responsible, even if our kids attend small schools. The community is looking to the Board for leadership on these issues.

People are working more hours, for less money, and they are looking for schools to become more efficient like business and industry has become. It is painful, and we value education, so maybe we have avoided cuts because it has to do with children. It's not easy to find ways to identify where we can become efficient. On the other hand, there are some clear indicators. The number of empty seats is an easy indicator. And, schools need to find internal efficiencies with staff. All processes need to be looked at up and down the system. If we make a mistake in business, it's fixed in a very short period of time.

Committees can be frustrating and the speed of the world has changed. We can't wait around for decisions. The public has a problem with a long decision-making process. A year to decide who decides is too long to wait in the business community. Business people watch this and scrutinize it. It may impact the mill levy. Efficiencies could support the mill levy.

Need for Additional Community Engagement:

Panel members felt many forum attendees did not understand the complex issues the district faces, especially related to state funding. They expressed the need to engage the public so they have a greater awareness and understanding of the following issues:

- The state funding formula and overall funding for K-12 education in Colorado compared with other states
- Student-based budgeting, the district funding formula
- How mill levy and bond uses funds can and can't be used
- Closing a school doesn't mean the program closes or goes away; it can remain intact and serve the needs of students in a different facility.
- Small schools do not mean small class sizes.
- People don't understand that Fort Collins is not growing and is not projected to grow, and how this influences the PSD budget.
- Neighborhood growth cycles, that once enrollment drops, the enrollment is not likely to increase to former levels.
- That School Choice is mandated by state law, and other state mandated requirements.