

Staff Comments Opposing Grade Reconfiguration and/or a Mega-School

Given the option (as part of the January 2016 parent/staff survey) to offer more complete comments, 52 staff members provided 10 pages of responses. In many cases, these responses express frustration, concern, doubt, and a great deal of outright opposition to the District's reconfiguration and consolidation plan. The following are just short excerpts from a few such staff responses. (Another 224 parents provided the School Committee with 49 pages of responses.) We strongly encourage people to read the full set of staff AND parent responses, which can be accessed here: <https://saveamherstssmallschools.wordpress.com/survey-jan-2016/>

"There comes a point whereby collaboration becomes much more difficult due to size. I cannot imagine how collaborating between 7-8 grade level team teachers would be efficient and/or effective. When teacher collaboration is considered, groupings should be kept smaller, e.g., 3-4 classroom grade level teachers plus support staff." (Comment # 1)

"The fabric of our community will be changed when children no longer can walk or bike to school due to distance and traffic. The amount of noise at a super school during community events might be untenable? More driving for parents of kids who miss the bus? More driving to play dates? Less chance of being in class with your neighbors? (Comment #5)

"I think it is important that children stay in their neighborhood. I think it is healthy for them to meet new friends *after* 6th grade...I would miss reading buddies between upper elementary and lower elementary." (Comment #7)

"The importance of continuity, of adults and students in a building, knowing each other over many years, and of the number and quality of relationships that can be built over an extended time period cannot be overstated. I see every day how very important these relationships are to students." (Comment #9)

"Keeping the community of K-6 or pre-K-6 in each school is important for maintaining the strongest bonds with families and throughout the years." (Comment #11)

"By creating district-wide schools, more families within lower socio-economic groups may be impacted: if students miss the bus and families don't have a car, or need to get to work, (these kids) tend to miss school...This difference, which we see already, will become more evident with creating a district-wide school." (Comment # 15)

"Fewer transitions for students and an opportunity to be known throughout your elementary school career are predictive of better school success." (Comment #18)

"I am concerned about building large, district-wide schools because I care about children's need to feel that they belong to a community! It is essential to children's sense of themselves as students that they are given the opportunity to learn in one school over a number of years. If they are able to interact over time with their former teachers, they are able to maintain a sense that they are known and that their academic growth is recognized...This kind of sense of community and shared identity is centrally important to elementary school aged children and it would clearly be lost if we were to invest in large, grade-level segregated schools!" (Comment # 21)

"(The option) with two, K-6 wings is the best option for the social-emotional development of the students and their families. If a family is associated with one school for seven years, the staff and other families are more likely to know them well and be able to support them in a time of need. The greater the connection to the school, the more involved a family will be in their children, school and community." (Comment # 22)

"I STRONGLY disagree with the (apparently firmly fixed) idea that we would all be better with larger schools. I STRONGLY believe that the small, neighborhood schools are OVERWHELMINGLY better for our children. I am perfectly willing to keep working in a less than desirable school building for the time being and would be happy to work toward grant-writing, fundraising, another shot at state money –whatever it might take—to find a way to ALSO rebuild Fort River. I am COMPLETELY opposed to all of the reconfiguration plans and find it incomprehensible that the District has gone down this road. Families move to Amherst and put up with exorbitant taxes because of the close community and the strength of the small school system. It is no wonder that they are switching to the charter options in droves." (Comment #24)

"My first choice would be to build a new Wildwood and to then also build a new Fort River. Both schools desperately need to be replaced. Research shows that small schools are best for students. We would never decide to fix all the roads and bridges in town in one year. It seems reasonable to say we will fix (replace) one school at a time. Since this does not seem to be an option, I strongly feel that the two, K-6 'twin' schools is the next best option. Students need to feel they are part of a community that is a manageable size for their age." (Comment #25)

"Crocker Farm is a gem. To see Derek Shea and Sharri Conklin knowing every single student, deeply, is beautiful. That will go away if you have 750 students in an elementary school. Save the great school with the healthy environment and build one great new one, but don't take away one that is already in place and succeeding in so many ways. Fort River has to be replaced. That should be an easy decision." (Comment # 27)

"Research supports smaller schools where students feel comfortable and they know each other and staff...Teachers collaborate more when they are given time to do so. Placing them together without additional time in the schedule will not ensure collaboration." (Comment # 28)

"The elementary schools should remain as they are. There is going to be too much traffic going from one part of town to the other. Too many school buses will be parked outside the schools." (Comment # 30)

"I understand this to be, in large part, a financially driven decision and I acknowledge that is important, but we still need to make the best possible learning decision for our students. The number of transitions students would need to make if CF became a pre-K-2 school would be very tough for kids, especially our most vulnerable kids." (Comment #36)

"Having formerly worked in a district where grade levels were separated into pre-K-1 and then 2-4, I saw that it created problems in planning for children, particularly those with special needs or who are at risk for learning. Resentment and negative feelings were fostered between teachers regularly. Parents were just getting to know one school when it was time to move to the next or had children in both schools." (Comment # 37)

"One thing I value most at my current school is the sense of community and connection between students of different grade levels. It would be a disservice to isolate students according to age/grade-level." (Comment #42)

"I think the least favorable plans are the ones that increase transitions for students. All of the factors we value regarding impact on learning are diminished by multiple transitions, including such things as students feeling and being known, consistency, staff collaboration, etc. [a long list follows]." (Comment #43)

"...I've read both the "draft preliminary design program for school building" and the "Educational Plan" and see no real benefits for Options C and D (large school models that reconfigure grades), beyond having a new building. They are disastrous models, in my opinion, for students, staff and for families...No good argument has been made for Options C or D...I fail to understand why Options C and D are even being considered now that Option B exists (a 670-student, two-wing school with K-6 structure)." (Comment # 47)