

Futures Task Force

Recommendation Report

September 11, 2023

Introduction

This report summarizes the progress and outcomes of the RSU 16 Futures Task Force meetings and activities, with a focus on addressing organizational challenges and enhancing the educational experience within RSU 16. The Task Force was established to explore potential solutions to various issues affecting the school district, including facility needs and educational opportunities. This report outlines the Task Force's journey, discussions, and the recommendations that have emerged from their collaborative efforts.

Problem Statement

Over the years, RSU 16 has confronted a multitude of challenges, including a list of deferred maintenance needs that have contributed to the gradual deterioration of our elementary infrastructure. This issue is further compounded by a nationwide teacher shortage that makes it difficult to fill vacant positions. Concurrently, rather than taking into account the variations in student populations at the elementary school level, RSU 16 has chosen to aim for equal distribution of positions across all three elementary schools. Regrettably, this strategy has resulted in uneven class sizes and discrepancies in per-pupil expenditure across elementary schools.

Additionally during the 2022-2023 school year, the district has grappled with a scarcity of bus drivers, leading to the cancellation of 90 bus routes and placing undue strain on our families and transportation department. As we address these multifaceted challenges, recruitment and retention necessitate that we must also advocate for the increases in salaries from contract/work agreement negotiations. While facing the reality of maintaining aging buildings, it is easy to forget our comparatively "newest" high school and middle school, which is now 24 years old and Central Office.

Amidst these issues, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to our students' well-being and education. The importance of Title I services and the obligation to ensure Title I comparability cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the escalating costs of resources and services across the schools only serve to compound the financial strain our district is experiencing.

In light of these circumstances, it is imperative that we approach these challenges with a cohesive strategy that addresses the holistic needs of our students, staff, and infrastructure. A comprehensive plan is essential to maintaining the integrity of our educational complexes, enhancing the quality of education, and providing our students with a secure and conducive learning environment.

Organization and Meeting Details

The primary objective of the RSU 16 Futures Task Force is to analyze challenges, conduct research and propose solutions that will lead to a more effective and efficient education system within the district.

Meeting 1: Organizational Meeting, Date: May 23, 3:30 - 5:30PM

- Key Points: Introduction to team dynamics and models, book study, and team membership.

Meeting 2: Introduction and Initial Planning, Date: May 31, 5:00 - 7:00PM

- Key Points: Exploration of team development stage, review of RSU 16 issues, and introduction to adaptive challenges.

Meeting 3: Data Collection and Analysis, Date: June 6, 6:00 - 8:00PM

- Key Points: Book discussion, scenario development, and data-driven analysis of challenges.

Meeting 4: Community Engagement, Date: June 20, 6:00 - 8:00PM

- Key Points: Public engagement strategies, exploration of grade configurations, and the formation of sub-groups.

Meeting 5: Feedback from Stakeholders, Date: July 18, 8:00 - 10:00AM

- Key Points: Review of predicted obstacles, insights from stakeholders, and functional capacity assessments.

Meeting 6: Final Recommendations, Date: August 15, 8:00AM - 11:00AM

- Key Points: Adult education programming, characteristics of thriving schools, evidence-based scenario statements, and consensus building.

Meeting 7: Sub-Committee Presentations, Date: August 28, 6:00 - 7:30PM

- Key Points: Sub-committee presentations to update the School Board on task force activities.

Meeting 8: Final Recommendations, Date: August 29, 6:00 - 8:00PM

- Key Points: Consensus in scenario elimination, non-binding poll

Key Themes and Discussions:

Throughout the task force meetings, several key themes and discussions emerged:

- Recognition of team development, with a focus on understanding common goals and team dynamics.
- Exploration of High Performing Team qualities to foster collaboration and trust.
- Application of the Ladder of Inference to promote effective thinking and inquiry.
- Use of Ronald Heifetz's work on Technical vs Adaptive challenges, emphasizing collective learning for adaptive solutions.
- In-depth discussions of RSU 16 issues, including teacher shortages, class size inequalities, transportation challenges, and aging infrastructure.
- Analysis of potential scenarios for addressing RSU 16 challenges, involving school consolidation, reconfiguration, and grade-level adjustments.
- Community engagement efforts to gather insights and ideas from various stakeholders, including staff and community members.
- Timely dissemination of information underscored our commitment to transparency.
- Evaluation of functional capacities within school buildings and their implications for different scenarios.
- Development of evidence-based statements to support the presented scenarios.
- Consensus-building efforts using the "Fist to Five" protocol to determine viable scenarios for further consideration.
- Non-binding informational poll for sending 6th grade to middle school and preferred scenario.

Options - “Scenarios”

Over the past few months, following a staff and a community forum, we have conducted research into four different scenarios.

Scenario 1 – Fund, Fix & Staff PCS, MCS and ESS with Current Configuration

This scenario aligns with the current functional capacity, operational structure, and staffing requirements of RSU 16. While it presents financial implications to the towns to maintain all three elementary schools, it ensures the continuity of existing educational and community frameworks. However, careful financial planning and monitoring of staffing costs are advised to maintain effective educational services and optimal facilities and learning environments.

Scenario 2 - Consolidate MCS into ESS. Fund, Fix & Staff ESS & PCS with Current Configuration

As of August 29, 2023, Scenario 2 has been eliminated by the Futures Task Force through consensus. This consolidation streamlines operations, maximizes resource utilization, and presents potential long range cost savings. However, the addition of modular facilities, renovation costs and placement of Adult Education must be thoroughly considered. Addressing community concerns and fostering a new consolidated community is vital, and meticulous financial planning should accompany this scenario's implementation. Regular evaluation of staffing requirements and maintaining collaborative opportunities are key to ensuring the success of this consolidation.

Scenario 2 was ruled out because it presented a multitude of challenges, particularly in the context of merging two elementary schools into a single entity while leaving one school unaffected.

Scenario 3 - Close MCS. Fund, Fix & Staff ESS as a PreK-2 and PCS as a Grade 3-6 School.

This scenario presents potential cost savings through consolidation and reconfiguration, optimizing resources, and offering opportunities for enhanced teacher collaboration and growth of programs. Rigorous financial planning, communication, and community-building efforts are imperative for the successful implementation of this scenario.

Scenario 4 - Fund, Fix & Staff ESS as a Grade Pre-K-2 School, PCS as a Grade 3-4 School and MCS as a Grade 5-6 School

As of August 15, 2023, Scenario 4 has been eliminated by the Futures Task Force. This scenario involved reconfiguring ESS as a PreK-2 school, PCS as a Grade 3-4 school, and MCS as a Grade 5-6 school. The scenario was evaluated based on financial, operational, and educational considerations.

Scenario 4 was eliminated due to its various challenges, including increased transitions for students and the necessity to develop and foster multiple new school communities. The complexities and potential negative impacts, coupled with the significant financial investment required, contributed to its elimination.

Conclusion

The RSU 16 Futures Task Force has worked diligently to research information on the challenges facing the school district and to propose innovative solutions. Through collaborative discussions, engagement with stakeholders, and comprehensive analysis, the Futures Task Force recommends two scenarios that have the potential to transform RSU 16 into a more efficient, effective, and student-focused educational institution. The Task Force acknowledges that the final decision rests with the School Board and remains committed to supporting the implementation of whichever scenario is chosen. It is with a shared vision of progress and improvement that the RSU 16 Futures Task Force concludes its work, ready to contribute to the betterment of the educational experience for all students within the district.

A strategic plan is of utmost importance due to its role in providing a clear roadmap for RSU 16's future. It should outline well-defined goals, priorities, and actions. This comprehensive framework aids in aligning resources, making informed decisions, and adapting to changing circumstances, ultimately leading to more effective and efficient operations.

The refinement and adherence to the Capital Improvement Plan, including a catch up timeline and preventive measures, is essential for the revitalization of our school district's aging infrastructure, enhancing safety, efficiency, and overall educational quality. By addressing deferred maintenance and following through with preventative maintenance practices, we ensure that students and staff can thrive in a conducive learning environment.

In our pursuit of providing an exceptional education for our students, it is imperative that we prioritize the enhancement of a diverse range of educational opportunities. This approach will contribute to the development of a well-rounded and comprehensive learning experience that equips our students with the skills, knowledge, and mindset needed to excel in an ever-evolving world.

Recommended School Board Actions

The School Board is presented with a series of critical decisions that will shape the district's educational and operational landscape. Each decision carries implications for resource allocation, educational quality, and community engagement. The chosen path will determine the trajectory of RSU 16's growth and development. It is recommended that the School Board engages in thorough discussions, considering the best interests of students, staff, and the community at large.

Recommended Next Steps (in no particular order):

1. Update and monitor a funded strategic plan.
 - a. **CIP Plan Prioritization** ("Fix Them"): Decide on the implementation and monitoring of a Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) that includes addressing deferred maintenance and establishing preventive maintenance measures. Develop a prioritized plan to "fix" previously deferred maintenance issues.
 - b. **Heat and Ventilation Improvement** ("Fix Them"): Develop and implement a comprehensive plan to improve heating and ventilation systems across the district. This initiative aims to enhance air quality within school facilities.
 - c. **Educational Opportunities Vision** ("Staff Them"): Create a visionary plan for enhancing educational opportunities within RSU 16, focusing on strategic staffing to meet student needs and promote academic excellence.
 - d. **Budget Development** ("Fund Them"):
 - i. Understand and support Administrators yearly budget requests to provide new essential resources (positions and programs) for student growth and success.
 - ii. Consider allocating additional funds for the CIP plan, ensuring its successful execution and the continuation of maintenance efforts.
2. Direct staff to acquire quotes and review associated costs (additional square footage, renovation, conversion, playground relocation, staff parking area, moving costs) for potential projects.
3. Develop a Public Relations (PR) plan to effectively communicate decisions, initiatives, and improvements to the community. Include the upkeep of the Q & A document.
4. In pursuit of funding, direct staff to apply for the Revolving Renovation Fund to support planned projects.
5. Establish a new, smaller Steering Committee responsible for providing leadership and momentum to the School Board during their deliberation to a final decision.
6. Assemble a diverse Sub-Committee to envision the future of new elementary school facilities and apply for state building projects.
7. Decide the location for Adult Education services, taking into consideration logistical and budgetary implications.

8. Determine the location for 6th grade.
9. Address the future of the MCS building and its utilization.
10. Adjourn the Futures Task Force in accordance with its intended objectives; however call on their collective expertise as needed.
11. Consider maintaining an “Advisory Council” to meet quarterly. Membership to include: District Administration, Building Principals, School Board, Staff Representatives, Town Officials and Community Members.
12. The School Board faces the decision of maintaining the current transportation setup with two runs (MS/HS and Elementary) or transitioning to three runs (Ex: MS/HS, Elementary School A, Elementary School B). The chosen option will impact the district's transportation costs, schedules, and resource allocation.
13. If consolidation and/or reconfiguration occurs, the School Board must decide on:
 - a. Reducing potential redundant positions to optimize operational efficiency.
 - b. Adjusting teacher positions while maintaining an optimal class size to foster effective learning environments.
 - c. Determining grade spans in the case of reconfiguration.
14. Direct the Superintendent (Assistant Superintendent) to continue to monitor and report elementary class sizes, in August, September, and October at Board meetings. If class sizes exceed the maximum range, develop and implement a contingency plan to address the situation promptly.
15. Make decision(s), including implementation timeline, by December so the budget reflects associated costs.

Futures Task Force Members:

Todd Sanders, Amy Hediger, Erik Anderson, Shawn Vincent, Jessica Madsen, Kaitlynn Brown, Brandi Comeau, Jenny Rose, Jo St Peter, John Hawley, Jacque Russo, Jennifer Gagnon, D'Arcy Robinson, Steve Robinson, Brittany Hemond, Robert Klar, Terri Arsenault, Tarsha Downing, Randy Lautz, Angela Swenson, Elizabeth Martin, Emily Rinchich, Mary Martin.