

Amherst Elementary School Building Project: Teacher/Staff Survey

All Open-Ended Comments and Questions Received

January 2016



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This document contains the 52 open-ended comments and questions submitted by respondents to the Teacher/Staff Survey on the Amherst Elementary School Building Project, administered January 4, 2016, to January 11, 2016.

Approximately 38 percent of all respondents to the Teacher/Staff Survey submitted comments/questions.

To ensure respondent anonymity, no additional identifying information is included with the comments/questions.

The comment numbers were added for reference purposes. They were assigned randomly and thus do not reflect any other factors (such as date submitted, school, grade level, or building option preferences).

Paragraph breaks were manually added to longer responses in order to improve readability. Aside from that change, there were no other edits made to the comments; they are included verbatim in this document.

| Comment Number | Comment/Question |
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| 1 | 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. |
| 2 | The schools recently redistricted. Teachers and families have worked hard to rebuild communities in their schools, with success. Has a traffic study been completed? What is the cost of moving materials between schools? |
| 3 | <p>Renovation/new building considerations re: Technology I am aware that building projects and renovations need to try to use a Magic 8 Ball and project into the future how classrooms and other rooms and open spaces will be used to the best possible extent. I also know that good design also takes into account the client's needs, not just incorporating the current trends of architecture and space design. To this end, the trend is to not include a "computer lab" in current school designs. I am fully in favor of integrating technology into all classrooms and into curriculum for all students. A major concern I have that I would like the committee to be aware of is that the need for such labs still needs to be a part of the new design. I say this because of the following reasons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="383 1024 1427 1171">1. Online testing, such as the current ACCESS testing that is being administered to the ELL students, is best given using desktops not wireless laptops. The Information Systems director has stated that he recommends the use of wired desktops over laptops for this purpose. <li data-bbox="383 1203 1427 1518">2. Amherst continues to have Technology on the ARTS schedule rotation. What this means is that Instructional Technology is on the rotation to cover classroom teacher prep periods. If this model is to continue, then labs need to be included in the building plan. Many factors go into the formulation of schedules but the reality is that it seems that Technology Instruction is to remain on the ARTS rotation for the foreseeable future. If scheduling of Instructional Technology for grades K-6 stays as it is, then functional instruction classroom(s) need to be provided for this in the new building. This need needs to be addressed early in the design stage so that adequate space and storage is allotted to these classrooms. <li data-bbox="383 1560 1427 1873">3. Please be aware of the amount of technology equipment that is already in use in the elementary schools and how much space is needed for storage and security. Just this year, 26 Chromebook carts have been added to the elementary schools alone. This is in addition to ipad carts and regular laptop carts. As tech trends indicate, laptops and ipads get smaller but they all still need charging stations and carts to do this, this need will not diminish. Other equipment such as robotic kits, cameras and video equipment will also need secure storage. Toner and printer kits are also stored in each school in the current computer labs. These take up a lot of space, so please do not diminish the need of storage space for these items as well. |

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| 4 | I feel that having CF be an early childhood building would allow for PK to feel more included, allow for more collaboration between PK and K and 1t grade, allow for young children to have fewer transitions in the early grades by attending one school, and have the overall focus of the building be for young children, such as developmentally appropriate assemblies, etc. |
| 5 | The fabric of our community will be changed when children can no longer 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? |
| 6 | The physical disrepair of the Fort River building is a blemish on the town of Amherst. A new building accessible to both Wildwood and FR students and staff is a necessity. The configuration of the new building is secondary to the fact that we must close these noisy, dilapidated buildings asap . |
| 7 | I think it is important that children stay near their neighborhood. I think it is healthy for them to meet new friends after 6th grade rather than travel with them from pre-K to high school. I would miss reading buddies between upper elementary and lower elementary. |
| 8 | Whatever option is chosen, I think it is important to ask why the district did not budget maintenance expenses during the past twenty years so we can prevent this problem with any new buildings. The district's negligence to budget maintenance and repair expenses for Fort River and Wildwood led to the current dilemma-- outdated fire, ventilation, etc systems. This is unacceptable. Now the town will bear the burden of paying any remaining expenses beyond the grant money to rebuild and house the student population of two entire schools. |
| 9 | 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 can not be overstated. I see every day how very important these relationships are to students. Additionally, the increase in transportation cost, time, and complexity with some of the options seems absurd. Also, splitting siblings by age among multiple schools Creates an unnecessary hardship for families. |
| 10 | With our district being committed to promote family engagement, I would have concerns creating schools that do not feel like they are easily accessible (transportation-wise) to the families. We already have a difficult time getting some families to school for assemblies, conferences, open house night, etc. It would seem a disservice to split up children in one family (i.e. a kindergarten student at CF and another student in grade 2-6 in another building). I feel like having three K-6 schools will help to keep the "community" feel intact as well as help schools to better foster relationships with families. |
| 11 | Keeping the community of of K-6 or Pre-K - 6 in each school is important for maintaining the strongest bonds with families throughout the years. |
| 12 | I have shared my opinions at length with Mike Morris and some members of the school committee, but I will say briefly here: Choosing option A (new WW, keeping FR open) would, I believe, be the most inequitable option for students in Amherst. Secondarily, I also think that maintaining the K-6 model has enormous value. |

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| 13 | I am very curious about the plans for Wildwood during construction. While new buildings are being built, if they are on the Wildwood property, how will our students have access to the outdoors? Would we be relocated to a different location? I have not heard anything about this issue. |
| 14 | I am concerned about the unintended consequences of making an early childhood center. Will 2nd grade teachers, who are ECE certified by isolated in the bigger school. I would prefer pre-k-2 at CF and 3-6 at ww. |
| 15 | By creating district wide schools, more families with lower socio-economic group may be impacted... if students miss the bus, and if families don't have a car, or need to get to work, they tend to miss school because there is no way of transporting the child. They can't walk to school or there are not enough practical public transportation route. This difference, which we already see, will become more evident with creating district wide school....from parent-teacher conference, open house/curriculum night, school wide activities, and family connection. |
| 16 | I strongly feel that in order to live by the equity standards we care and works towards, all Amherst students should attend a healthy school that supports the needs of all students. |
| 17 | Problems with a combined Wildwood/Fort River School: *Cafeteria - too many students in one room at one time will make for a challenging and difficult environment, especially for students with sensory issues, *Bus and Car drop off and pick up may need to be staggered - how will this be facilitated?, *Smaller, neighborhood schools more conducive to healthy social relationships (friendships) out of school, *At a larger school, more difficult for staff to know each other, *Principal can't possibly know every student or even every staff person, *Scheduling for collaboration already difficult - will become even more so with more students in a larger building *May loose more students to charter schools, which tend to be small. |
| 18 | Fewer transitions for students and an opportunity to be known throughout your elementary school career are predictive of better school success. |
| 19 | I like the idea that the lower elementary children would be housed all in one building and the focus for curriculum would be narrowed to those grade levels. I don't like the idea of competing wings or schools K-6. This feels like a set up for rivalries. I'd rather have age appropriate wings lower ele. and upper ele. wings. Collaboration could be great this way. |
| 20 | The span for early childhood education (including MA teacher licensure) spans PreK-2, so it makes more sense to include grade 2 in any early childhood center. Students often form a bond with their teacher from previous years, so to not have access to them could be detrimental, especially to those students who struggle and who've formed a positive relationship with a trusted adult. It is difficult for those students who need to be retained to have to remain in a separate school or substantially separate wing from their peers who've moved on. |

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| 21 | <p>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. In addition, I have seen that older children really benefit from interacting with younger ones. When given the opportunity to support younger children, older ones often revisit and solidify concepts as they help teach their younger peers. They often develop a new self-confidence when they work with younger kids and gain perspective on how they have grown as learners themselves. Many of them take pride in being roles models and school leaders. 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!</p> |
| 22 | <p>Option B with 2 K-6 wings is the best option for the social - emotional development of the students and their families. Students perform better when they are comfortable and less stressed. Students would be able to meet future staff members, have less transitions, and know all their peers. The music, art, and physical education teachers would know their students better and therefore increase their growth more rapidly in those areas. In large clusters of 6 to 7 classes per grade level, the students that are shy, are more unique, or have transition issues would lose confidence in themselves. The foundation for learning is built during the elementary years for most students. Students from single parent homes or two working parent homes would be less likely to be driven all over Amherst to play with their friends made in school. Our three elementary schools are centers of community that follow the students into the higher grades and also unite families to support each other. Many families move to Amherst because of the numerous colleges in our town. Those families often have no extended family in the area and find their support community through the schools. 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.</p> |
| 23 | <p>There has not been a specific opportunity for teachers to voice their concerns outside of the public forums. We have had presentations and asked questions but not given feedback other than writing or making our own efforts.</p> |

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| 24 | 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. While I certainly agree that the Fort River and Wildwood buildings are increasingly unacceptable, I would have thought that the Superintendent and the School Committee would recognize the enormous amount of data supporting the superiority of the small neighborhood school, and that another option would have been strenuously sought. 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 the 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. |
| 25 | 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 two K-6 "twin" schools are the next best option. Students need to feel they are part of a community that is a manageable size for their age. |
| 26 | We need a healthy work environment for students and staff. FR and WW both need new schools. As a tax payer, \$\$ has to come into play as well. |
| 27 | 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. |
| 28 | Research supports smaller schools where students feel comfortable, and they know each other and the staff. A healthy building and learning environment is also extremely important to student success. Teachers collaborate more when they are given the time to do so. Placing them together without additional time in the schedule will not ensure collaboration. |
| 29 | For ELL teachers, focusing our attention (teacher collaboration, professional development) on a smaller grade span is ideal. |
| 30 | The middle school should be grade 6 -8 The high school grades 9-12. 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 |

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| 31 | ALL students in our community deserve to benefit from having a new school. |
| 32 | In my opinion the current learning environments in Wildwood and Fort River are unacceptable. Each day our most vulnerable students with learning, attentional, communication, and ESL issues find themselves in spaces that allow for frequent interruptions and significant levels of noise. I am looking forward to the day when my students do not look at me and say, "Why are they so loud?" multiple times during our lessons together. I believe the learning environment of the students should be our top priority to maximize the growth of our students. I feel strongly that this will also become a significant equity issue if some students remain in one of these buildings while others are given the gift of a learning environment that is designed to help them succeed. |
| 33 | Keeping K-6 schools helps children grow and develop respect and admiration of those students older than themselves and then care and compassion for those students younger than themselves. This critical child development task is much harder to nurture in more stratified grade level schools such as K-1, then 2-4, then 5-6. |
| 34 | Honestly, none of the survey questions/responses addressed the early childhood issue of the need of second grade to be placed with Kgtn and first grade. I seriously worry about 7/8s being placed in a school with upper elementary kids and away from early childhood environments. Second graders are still very young. I am not convinced. |
| 35 | I'd like more information on what a 750 student school would be like. Specifically, schedules, class sizes, lunch schedule, and would also like to see a traffic study done before the decision is made. There hasn't been enough engagement of the greater community as well as all staff in this conversation. |
| 36 | I understand this to be, in large part, a financially driven decision and I acknowledge that is important, but given that 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. Having continuity over 7 years is so important for many kids. Building relationships between guidance, ELL, administration and teachers with families and kids takes time and the pay off is in student learning and student growth, both social and academic. Leaving CF as is would minimize to some extent, the upheaval and make the mega school somewhat smaller. |
| 37 | 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. This is not conducive to good family relationships between the school and home. If grade levels were divided, I would divide at the top - put 5th and 6th in another building! |
| 38 | How will lunch times and bussing situations (drop-off and pick-up at school) be affected if there is one school? |
| 39 | Both Fort River and Wildwood schools are in very poor condition. The environment is not good for learning, teaching or working. Whatever plan is selected, it needs to have the support of the town so that a new school is built to replace both schools. We can't let this opportunity pass. |

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| 40 | I think it is very important that Fort River is not left the way that it is. The environment conditions, especially noisy quads and poor air quality must be rectified. Therefore, any plan must consider renovation or demolition of that building. |
| 41 | Does potential district regionalization with neighboring towns (e.g. Shutesbury, Leverett, and Pelham are included at the elementary level as well as the current middle and high school level) impact the decision? I could see issues with Amherst having a brand new school that is 2-6 and neighboring towns continuing to have a K-6 program. Would many students school choice into preferred schools (if the preference is for K-6) if the district doesn't regionalize AND reconfigures the grades? Is the 2-6 building a viable financial option for long-term? We were told Marks Meadow had to close for financial considerations and that the savings over time were substantial, yet, we are again faced with financial constraints that will result in significant changes in the district both in terms of actual learning environments and pedagogy. |
| 42 | 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. |
| 43 | I think the least favorable plans are the ones that increase transitions for students.. All of the other factors we value regarding impact on learning are diminished by multiple transitions including such things as students feeling and being known, consistency, staff collaboration, belonging to and identifying with a community in their school and neighborhood, being known and communicated about well from grade level to grade level, ability to follow up with academic and personal needs, establishing enduring and positive relationships between school and family...the "rebuild Wildwood only" would also resolve this but seems unfair to one school community so not really an option, I think. |
| 44 | I would like to see Crocker farm become prek - 2 for teacher collaboration and how the teacher license breaks down. It also allows for there to be an extra year of growth for the student before a school building transition. |
| 45 | I agree that Wildwood Elementary and Fort River Elementary schools both have serious physical plant challenges. The open classroom settings in both of those facilities are substandard to efficient learning environments and it would be beneficial to our school district to see that altered. My daughter went to school at Fort River and I taught in both school buildings. Teachers worked hard to effectively use the open room concept, but it indeed is NOT ideal. All students perform better in a closed classroom setup. I understand from public presentations that heating and cooling systems are deficient in these aging buildings. The negative learning environment is of biggest concern to me. Cost is a huge concern to our community. The most cost effective plan is most desirable, and I do hope to see the school population increase in future years. Thank you. |
| 46 | Having worked in a district that went to two grades per building, I felt there would be a great negative impact on community building and student behavior, by putting large amounts of students in a single grade into a wing or only 2 or 3 grades into one building. |

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| 47 | <p>Having students transition THREE times in their elementary years seems like the worst possible option for young learners. And offers many fewer opportunities for children and teachers to collaborate across grade levels and really get to know all students. This would be especially difficult for the specialists named below. For our most needy students, these transitions would be brutal. Children continue to connect with and visit their primary grade teachers throughout their elementary school years. To have children snatched from the adults they know and trust after 1st grade sounds terrible to me. Having 2nd grade not be a part of Primary School(Early Childhood) is ridiculous. Does this mean teachers of second and third graders would not have access to early childhood reading specialists? Would materials below grade level (particularly in reading) be unavailable for second and third graders? Would Pre-K through 1st graders not have access to higher level reading materials? What would the libraries look like? How could aesthetics teachers really get to know students? If families of children at different grade levels were stretched across two or three schools(just in elementary school!), their sense of belonging and opportunities for participation would be diminished. These things don't seem to have been thought through.</p> <p>I've read the both the "draft preliminary design program for school building" and the "Educational Plan" and see no real benefits for Options C and D, beyond having a new building. They are disastrous models, in my opinion, for students, for staff, and for families. The one page "Implications of Enrollment Options" is inaccurate in several places. The Zoning ("islands" of apartment complexes) could be addressed with redistricting. Teacher Collaboration would not have "highest levels for ALL staff" in option D; SPED, OT, PT, SLP, and aesthetics teachers would not have greatest collaboration.</p> <p>No good argument has been made for Options C or D, nor have I heard any staff or families speak favorably about these options. The "opportunities for collaboration" argument from district administration sounds very disingenuous to me. District administration has time and time again taken away opportunities for collaboration over the past several years: eliminating Wednesday afternoon collaborative time, cutting para hours, and dictating curriculum. I fail to understand why Options C and D are even being considered, now that Option B exists.</p> |
| 48 | <p>Is there any possible option to consider a smaller new building and the use of Town financial input to expand CF and make it a true Early Ed Cntr with grades PK-2? The current C & D options have the majority of our youngest learners transitioning after only 2 years (K/1). In addition, teacher cert for EE spans Prek-2 so there should be more access for teacher collaboration within specific needs for recert.</p> |
| 49 | <p>Why does the district have so many administrators and so few educational supports to help children learn? Will the new construction help with this issue?</p> |

| Comment Number | Comment/Question |
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| 50 | <p>I SEE SEVERAL FACTORS WHICH COULD MAKE THE COMBINED SCHOOL PROJECT UNTENABLE, OR AT LEAST NEEDED TO BE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED BEFORE A DECISION IS SENT FORTH FOR APPROVAL.</p> <p>1. A PROJECT THIS LARGE, WHILE IT MAY BE BETTER FOR THE LONG TERM GOOD, WILL PRESENT A MUCH LARGER BOND ISSUE THAN THE TOWN VOTERS ARE WILLING TO ACCEPT. SCHOOLS ARE NOT AS HIGH A PRIORITY FOR EVERYONE AS THEY ARE FOR PARENTS AND STAFF, IN WHICH CASE WE MAY END UP WITH NOTHING. THE NUMBER OF CROCKER FARM PARENTS WHO OPPOSE THIS MAY ALSO PLAY A FACTOR, ESPECIALLY IF THE DECIDE TO FILE SUIT.</p> <p>2. LONG TERM ADDED EXPENSES AROUND TRANSPORTATION REDUCE THE FISCAL BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT. THERE ALSO MAY BE CONTRACTUAL OBLIGATIONS WITH UNIONS AND OUTSIDE PROVIDERS (e.g. FOOD SERVICE, HEATING FUEL, ETC) THAT COULD COMPLICATE THINGS.</p> <p>3. SHARED FACILITIES FOR 750 KIDS IS A NICE IDEA, BUT IT USUALLY ENDS UP WITH LUNCHESES STARTING AT 10 A.M. , RECESSES TOO BIG FOR AVAILIABLE STAFF TO COVER, AND GYM CLASSES SO LARGE THE TEACHERS CAN'T HEAR THEMSELVES THINK, NEVER MIND BEING ABLE TO INSTRUCT THE STUDENTS.</p> <p>4. WE WOULD HOPE THAT CREATING TWO SEPERATE ENTITIES IN ONE BUILDING WOULD NOT RESULT IN CLIQUES FORMING WITH STUDENTS (AND POTENTIALLY STAFF), BUT HUMAN NATURE IS WHAT IT IS. WE ARE A TRIBAL SPECIES, AND NOT EVERYONE HAS THE STRENGTH AND CONVICTION TO OVERCOME THAT.</p> |
| 51 | <p>If CF is PreK-1 with specialized programs: 1. What consideration and planning have been done for bathroom facilities? Current quantity and location would appear inadequate for younger students, and could result in 6th graders and 1st graders sharing facilities, depending upon classroom locations. 2. Seems isolating for SE program students in grades 2-6. 3. Bus routes could result in long rides from the outlying edges of town to CF. How has this been addressed to provide appropriate travel times? RE: all 2-6 in same building with 2 grade-based groupings in a new building: 1. Would seem to provide the most equity and integration for the majority of students. 2. Program students in grades 2-6 would not be with grade peers?</p> |
| 52 | <p>It is important that Fort River is included in renovations - it is much needed!</p> |



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