

**MERSD Elementary Configuration Task Force
Task Force Recommendation to MERSD School Committee**

Background

The Manchester Essex Regional School District (MERSD) includes two Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 5 Elementary Schools. Following the completion of a preliminary internal assessment of the existing conditions of the two schools in 2012, the District recognized both buildings would require improvements and commissioned a professional study conducted by Habeeb & Associates Architects in early 2013.

The Habeeb study explored three solutions which were determined by MERSD to be the most logical possibilities moving forward:

Option A: Renovations and additions (if needed) to each of the two schools while maintaining the current grade configuration and serving the residents of each respective town.

Option B: Combine the students of each town and consist of renovations and additions (if needed) to each of the two schools while creating an early education center housing Pre-K, K, 1 and 2 at one of the schools, and grades 3 through 5 at the other.

Option C: Combine the students of each town in a new facility appropriately located on a new site.

The projected cost of the options range from \$40MM to \$47MM, and the Habeeb report included information about existing educational spaces, required educational spaces, operating capacities, size of additions and projected costs for upgrades, additions, and new structures.

Considering the significant investment that will be required by Essex and Manchester taxpayers to improve the District's aging elementary schools, MERSD fielded a Facilities Expansion Survey in both communities, and formed an Elementary Configuration Task Force in the of Fall 2013. The goal of these two initiatives was to gauge community awareness of critical facilities issues, and learn stakeholder priorities and preferences.

Formation of Elementary Configuration Task Force

The task force is chaired by Caroline Weld and Jim Haskell who represent the Facilities Sub Committee of the MERSD School Committee. It consists of 10 volunteer residents who represent various constituencies in the towns of Essex and Manchester:

Essex	Manchester
Timothy St. Laurent – Preschool Parent	Krista Jakes – Elem/Preschool Parent
Christine Woodman –Elem Parent	Flo Johnson – Elem/Middle School Parent
Michael Gerhardt –Elem Parent	Regina Villa – Community Member at Large
Rebecca Jones – Community Member at Large	Sue Pick – Finance Committee
Susan Coviello – Board of Selectman	Eli Boling – Board of Selectman

Task Force Objective

The Elementary Configuration Task Force was charged with delivering a recommendation to the MERSD School Committee answering the following question: **Should MERSD maintain the current neighborhood school model or move to a unified elementary model?**

Cost and financial impact to taxpayers in Essex and Manchester is top of mind with building projects of this magnitude. Those issues will be addressed in detail by a Building Committee during the next phase, beginning in Spring 2014.

Discovery Process

Between September and December 2013, members of the task force engaged in the following activities to inform their recommendation:

- Attended presentation and reviewed Facilities Needs Assessment from Habeeb & Associates Architects. For copies of presentations and details, click on visit the [Elementary Facilities Project Page](#).
 - [Habeeb & Associates Presentation](#)
 - [Habeeb & Associates Facilities Report](#)
- Reviewed [MERSD regional agreement](#). To read this agreement, click on [Regional Agreement](#) at.
- Read professional journal articles and secondary research about the pros and cons of different school configurations, renovating or replacing buildings, etc. [Elementary Task Force Resources](#)
- Reviewed results from [Facilities Expansion Survey](#) fielded by MERSD in conjunction with independent technology and communication firm, K12 Insight. For details, click on [Elementary Facilities Survey Overview](#)
- Established format, data recording, and data reporting processes for interviews, constituent meetings and public forums. (See Appendix A for Guiding Questions documents).
- Conducted phone interviews with superintendents in other communities throughout Massachusetts using guiding questions about pros/cons of different school configurations, their process for deciding on the configuration, approach for community involvement and awareness, etc.
- Moderated community focus groups with the following constituencies: Memorial School Council, Manchester PTO, Manchester Council on Aging, MEMHS Staff, Essex PTO, Essex Division Chamber, Essex Council on Aging, Manchester Division Chamber, ME Rotary, Essex Elementary Staff, MEMHS School Council, Pre-K Parents Essex, Pre-K Parents Manchester, Memorial Elementary Staff, Realtors, Essex School Council. (Notes for each meeting available upon request.)

Discovery Process (continued)

- Hosted community forums in Essex and Manchester where participants broke out into smaller groups to share opinions and discuss pros and cons of configuration options. (Notes for each forum available upon request.)
- Met six times as a task force, together with the MERSD Superintendent and Director of Finance & Operations, to review, discuss, and debate results of our findings, and arrive at our final recommendation.
- Developed FAQ and Quick Facts to address questions often heard in various groups and forums. (See Appendix B for the group handout).

Major Learning & Themes

- There is no primary or secondary research that will definitively tell us which model is best. Continue to be transparent, and continue dialogue with the communities at large.
- The superintendents interviewed were from a mix of configurations and school/district sizes, and in most cases there were no significant operational savings for one configuration versus another.
- Advocate for the structure that best meets the needs of the two communities, and stay focused on balancing cost challenges with academic and programmatic benefits for our students.
- Neighborhood K-5 schools are the heart of each town, encourage a strong sense of community, provide a preferred smaller overall student population, allow for walking to school, and the mix of younger and older together gives older students the opportunity to be role models.
- While some elementary staff members at both schools pointed to efficiencies and the ability to better balance resources with other configurations, the consensus was that maintaining the neighborhood model for this age group was most appropriate.
- Members of various constituent groups were somewhat open to different configurations but would need to be better informed about the financial benefit of changing the neighborhood model, and what value it brings to the school, curriculum, and our students.
- People definitely buy a house in either Essex or Manchester and expect their young children will go to school in that town K-5. Local realtors strongly supported neighborhood schools and thought home values and demand would be negatively affected for some time if there was a change in configuration.

Recommendation

Based on the learning from our discovery, the task force recommends maintaining the neighborhood school model for the two elementary schools in MERSD. While there is some traction and interest in the unified elementary model, the collective consensus from a variety of community groups clearly points to the neighborhood model.

Following are a variety of quotes gathered during interviews, focus groups, and forums:

“When a student is in a school for six years, there are more opportunities for teachers and students to know one another. A deep understanding of all students is essential for strong academic and social growth.”

“Lots of kids (900) in one building is too many.”

“Can’t imagine being a preschool parent putting a kid on a bus to a different school. Some 5th grade parents already have trouble with this. At this age group, keep it local.”

“With 3-5 option, would be worried about all of the test taking grades in one building – how that anxiety might affect the culture, plus an even bigger disconnect with 2nd graders not knowing/being exposed to what’s coming up.”

“Neighborhood is preferred, but understand the practical issue of cost.”

To be clear, there were many questions involving cost and financial impact to the residents of Essex and Manchester for the three options outlined in the Habeeb report. As the MERSD School Committee seats a Building Committee and moves to the next phase of addressing our aging elementary facilities, providing this information in more detail will be imperative.

In addition, people are anxious to hear about the District’s plan to address/manage the likely surge in enrollment at the renovated schools as they progress to middle-high school. Many questioned how that facility would be able to handle the growing numbers.

For questions about this recommendation or if you need access to any supplemental documents or websites offered in the discover, please contact Caroline Weld or James Haskell.

Respectfully submitted,

Caroline Weld, Co-chair Facilities subcommittee
James Haskell, Co-chair Facilities subcommittee

Questions for the MERSD School Committee

What would happen to the old buildings if one new building was constructed?

True cost and feasibility of options?

Timing of all the options?

Is there an actual parcel of land available that is viable?

What is the expansion plan for both buildings?

What are the growth numbers for both towns?

Memorial school is in worse shape. How are the costs allocated?

Where do you put the students during renovations?

State funding options?

Appendix A

FOCUS GROUP GUIDELINES TO ELEMENTARY TASKFORCE

Questions

- Would you consider an alternative to neighborhood schools?
- What factors influence or guide your position?
- What information is important for the School Committee to communicate to residents of both towns as they move forward in this process?

Appendix B

Quick Fact Document handed to all forum attendees.

What is prompting the effort to explore elementary school options?

The Habeeb report of 2013 finds \$6.7M in repairs between Essex Elementary and Memorial Elementary within the next 1-5 years. Below, we’ve listed the building elements that will require attention in the next 10 years; these items will all cost the district in excess of \$100K each.

Issues estimated in excess of \$100K each		
Manchester Memorial		Essex
Roof (\$1.7M)	Parking Areas/Access Drives	Roof (\$1.1M)
Boilers (\$175K)	Sidewalks/Paved Play Areas	Boilers (\$114K)
Windows (\$2.4M)	Handicap Accessibility	Windows (\$630K)
HVAC (\$118K)	Supplemental Air Conditioning	Fire Protection
Fire Protection	Ceilings	Steam Unit Ventilators (\$280K)
Interior and Exterior Doors	Painting	Controls (\$142)
Kitchen	Floors	Parking Areas/Access Drives
Electric Service	Window Shades	Sink and Faucet Fixtures
Hot Water Unit Ventilators (\$367K)	Sink and Faucet Fixtures	
Controls (\$179K)		

Costs for repairs to existing buildings come out of the operating budget—the same budget that pays for salaries and educational expenses. More dollars spent on repairs means less money on education.

Charge to the task force: Make a recommendation to the School Committee regarding elementary school configuration.

What have we learned about operating cost savings from the new middle high school building?

Cost per square foot savings is 58% lower for heating and 17% lower for electricity.

What is the difference between MERSD’s operating and capital budget:

Operating costs: annual costs such as teacher/staff salaries and benefits, maintenance, educational materials, etc., contained in the school’s annual budget, funded by taxation, and approved at the Annual Town Meeting.

Capital costs: Principal and interest payments on long-term debt (typically maturity of 20-30 years) issued to finance the construction of our Middle High School building. Significant renovations or new construction for elementary facilities would be similarly financed. These are usually funded by a debt exclusion—an action taken by a community through a referendum vote

to raise the funds necessary to pay debt service costs for a particular project from the property tax levy, but outside the limits under Proposition 2.5% .

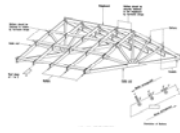
What's the process for renovation/rebuilding of elementary schools going forward?

- Task force makes recommendation to School Committee
- School Committee seats a building committee (Spring 2014)
- Building committee conducts a Feasibility Study (study of all alternatives, including, but not limited to, a final design program, space summary, budget statement for educational objectives, and a proposed total project budget).
- Building Committee prepares a Schematic Design (collaborates with the MSBA and develops a robust schematic design, of sufficient detail, in order to establish the scope, budget, and schedule).
- School Committee brings plan to two towns for a vote.

Where can I find more information about this process?

mersd.org go to the district page and look for Elementary Task Force process.

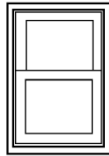
Roofs



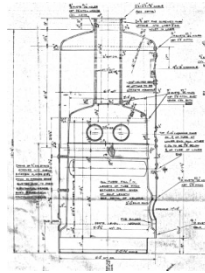
Priority 2 (1-5 years); Priority 3 (6-10 years)

<p>Memorial (\$1.7M) Priority 2</p> 	<p>Essex (\$1.1M) Priority 3</p> 
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Windows



<p>Memorial (\$2.4M) Priority 2</p>	<p>Essex (\$630K) Priority 2</p>
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Boilers and Controls

Memorial (\$175K) Priority 2



(\$179K) Priority

Essex (\$114K) Priority 3



(\$142K) Priority 3



2

