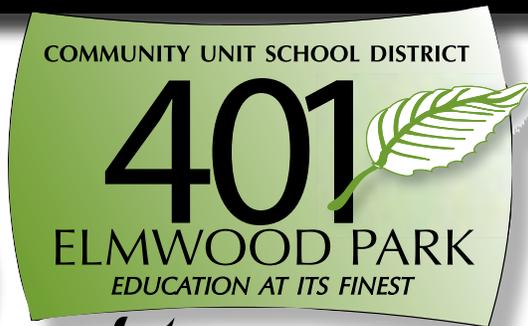


# FOCUS



## on Education

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## Shaping the Future of Elmwood Park CUSD 401: Special Edition

**T**his special edition of the *Focus on Education Newsletter* strives to provide a detailed explanation of the direction this great school district is heading in terms of a potential referendum. The district's consultants are currently requesting feedback from the community on three specific infrastructure options aimed at improving the elementary facilities. While there has been a great amount of feedback and engagement between the consultants/district and the community, a timeline of how the three specific infrastructure options came to be, and what has been communicated by all parties, seems necessary.

First, it is important to share what makes Elmwood Park CUSD 401 unique and successful. The district is the only unit district, or school district with grades K-12, in Cook County aside from the Chicago Public Schools. Most other unit districts are either in the Western Suburbs, or in rural Illinois. Having all grade levels under one umbrella is an incredible opportunity for students and educators in terms of providing an articulated learning experience.

In the past few years, the district has:

- Made significant strides in updating and expanding upon curriculum programs.
- Embraced the use of instructional technology.
- Added instructional coaching and professional development opportunities for staff.
- Expanded upon support services for students.
- Approved a full-day kindergarten program, and college and career pathways for grades 6-12, that will go into effect next school.
- Embarked upon a renovation and expansion project at Elm Middle School to house grade six beginning the next school year.

This is not a complete list of all the district's endeavors, but it should be stressed that all of these were accomplished within the district's financial means. Also, these efforts could not have been realized without the talented and committed staff and administrators who serve the students, parents, and greater community of Elmwood Park. These efforts have also led to statistically significant and meaningful district-wide gains on the state report card, the first in almost a decade.

### Preparation for the Referendum

In March 2019, the Board of Education approved a contract to retain the services of EOSullivan Consulting to collect information from the community. The goal was to help determine the best path forward to address the district's aging elementary facilities, and to identify and prioritize the needs and wants of parents and the community for future improvements related to programming and facilities. All communications to stakeholders and presentations related to this process are regularly updated on the district website at <https://www.epcusd401.org/referenduminfo>. Also on that website, are the latest news stories concerning the district's progress and growth, the superintendent's newsletter, and the district's podcast featuring students, staff and administration commenting on the many changes that are occurring.

EOSullivan Consulting created a four-phase community engagement process that allowed the community to collaborate on the plan for the future of the district's schools. Phase 1 occurred between March and May of 2019, when a Community Committee was created, a series of Community Engagement Sessions were scheduled, and an online survey was distributed.

The Community Committee is comprised of roughly 24 stakeholders that reflect the diverse demographics of the district and the larger community. The Community Committee assists the consultants in providing direct feedback, context to the district and community's history, and potential direction. The Community Committee, in the end, will also assist in informing the public about the eventual ballot measure that may be approved by the Board of Education, should this process result in a referendum.

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## Phase I: May 2019

The Community Engagement Sessions were held on May 1 at John Mills Elementary School at 6:00 pm, May 4 at Elmwood Elementary School at 10:00 pm, and May 14 at Elmwood Park High School at 6:00 pm.

An electronic survey was disseminated. It was designed to be “open ended” so the community could discuss what it felt was most important for the district moving forward.

Phase 1 provided a significant amount of meaningful feedback. First, that the three commonly identified strengths of the district are: the quality of staff and its ongoing development, the changes to the curriculum and related programming and technology, and district office communication efforts. Identified challenges included potential limits to expanding upon curriculum opportunities due to available space, the current state of the facilities, and increasing concern about bullying that happens with students, parents, and members of the community.

Also during Phase 1, parents and the community provided recommendations on what they wanted to see improved. This included modernizing the schools and ensuring the district continues its investment in the changes to curriculum, technology and teacher training. About whether or not parents and the community would like to invest more in the school district, 46% said they would and 30% said it would be contingent on the plan. Priorities included improvements in infrastructure, modernizing classrooms, and investing in safety and security.

## Phase 2: June-September 2019

Phase 2 occurred between June and September of 2019. It consisted of an online and phone survey to assist in prioritizing recommendations for enhancements to the district’s programming and facilities, continued meetings of the Community Committee, and more Community Engagement Sessions.

The Phase 2 Community Engagement Sessions were held on August 22 at John Mills Elementary School at 6:00 pm, August 29 at Elmwood Elementary School at 6:00 pm, and August 31 at Elmwood Park High School at 10:00 am.

All engagement efforts, including the online and phone surveys, asked for feedback in relation to ten potential individual projects identified from the Phase 1 feedback, three potential facility enhancement or infrastructure solutions for the elementary buildings, and three potential funding levels.

The individual projects include safety and security updates throughout the district, addressing the social and emotional health of students and parents, ADA accessibility (specifically at Elmwood Elementary School), STEM labs at the elementary buildings, adding a trades and manufacturing center at Elmwood Park High School, adding a wellness center for the community at one of the schools, adding or renovating music rooms throughout the district, improving athletic facilities, providing full-day preschool, and adding a swimming pool at Elmwood Park High School.

**When prioritized in the surveys by the community, safety and security, social and emotional health, and ADA accessibility at Elmwood Elementary School ranked the highest.**

Safety and security includes new doors and windows throughout the district, adding campus monitors, and upgrading the camera and alarm system. The district has already added new secure entrances to each of the buildings, hired a school resource officer housed at the high school, added campus monitors at the middle and high schools, scheduled the middle school and high school for upgrades to the camera and alarm system for summer 2020, installed new public address systems in the buildings, and upgraded the alarm system at John Mills Elementary School. Most of the building-related aspects of this project would occur in any project associated with renovating the existing elementary buildings, but additional campus monitors would come from the operations budget.

Regarding social and emotional health, a concern was expressed about bullying and harassment. The district communicated that it knows this is an issue and continues to work on this with students through its K-12 social-emotional learning curriculum, added social workers, and hired psychologists and behavior specialists. The district also communicated what is becoming an increasing priority, and is currently being assessed to determine the best path forward in further communications and providing assistance to it, is bullying and harassment exhibited by parents and community members towards one another and/or students.

Due to the Elmwood Elementary School layout, four elevators must be installed to make all of the school ADA accessible. For the entire school to be ADA accessible with one elevator would require the entire courtyard filled, the mechanical equipment moved, the hallways widened and classrooms moved to what would constitute the courtyard fill-in.

Following the top tier of projects is adding a trades and manufacturing center, improving upon athletic facilities, having full-day preschool, music rooms, and STEM labs.

The difficulty in maintaining a trades and manufacturing center is the significant investment needed to meet the needs of a particular trade or career pathway. Between the difficulty in finding personnel certified by the state and ensuring a consistent high enough level of interest from students to maintain the area, it is a costly endeavor for any high school to pursue. Through the engagement process, it has been repeatedly emphasized that there is a need for the district to invest in college and career pathways, and the district is implementing an articulated pathway system for grades 6-12 starting next school year. The district was also encouraged to continue expanding upon its partnerships, such as with Triton College and the Technical Center of DuPage, to provide trades and manufacturing opportunities for students.

Improving upon athletic facilities led to a series of mixed messages from parents and the community. Many felt the district should not be responsible, but the Village of

Elmwood Park should provide the green space and facilities needed for youth groups and organizations. Updating athletic facilities, while important, is not a high priority when compared to the elementary buildings.

For full-day preschool, the district communicated that it was difficult to find one example of a school district providing full-day preschool for all students that is tuition-free. If the district did move forward with this, it would mean another facility that can house up to 250 students and would require an increase of millions of dollars to operations to staff. It was also communicated that the district could not offer a full-day program because of the increased cost to the district. The district currently accepts funds from the Preschool For All (PFA) grant, which by accepting, immediately provides waivers to eligible students. Of the district's 100 or so preschool students, only a handful pay the tuition for the half-day program. If the district moved to full-day and accepted the PFA grant, the waivers would continue to extend to full-day programming, meaning hundreds of thousands of dollars already spent by the district to cover the cost of the program could be in the millions. At this time, the district will maintain its current preschool programming.

Due to the investments related to STEM made in the Science Wing at Elmwood Park High School and those currently unfolding at the construction project at Elm Middle School, many suggested providing modernized STEM labs to the elementary buildings. While uncommon, this is something that could potentially be explored contingent on the pursued infrastructure solution. The most common request from staff to fulfill the expectations of the STEMscopes curriculum is storage.

Any improvements to the music rooms would be accomplished through any elementary project.

Toward the bottom tier of priority projects was adding a swimming pool and wellness center. In short, these are not currently needed by the district or highly sought after by stakeholders.

**Three potential infrastructure solutions were provided during Phase 2. They are: renovating and expanding the current elementary buildings; building one new building and combining the two elementary schools; and building two new schools.**

1. Renovating the current elementary schools and adding a four-classroom addition to both buildings would total about \$55 million. The renovations would include addressing all of the life safety needs and modernizing the existing classrooms. This project could be completed within three to four summers and not interfere with the day-to-day operations of the school year.

2. Building one community elementary building would require the purchase of 21 homes and an intergovernmental agreement with the Village of Elmwood Park to acquire Mills Park. This project could take anywhere between four to six years depending on when the district is able to procure the necessary property, which would be targeted around John Mills Elementary School. A question commonly asked is, what would become of Elmwood

Elementary School? Elmwood Elementary School would be demolished and a green space created. The cost of the new building would be \$75 million, not including the cost of the property and whatever project could happen at Elmwood Elementary School.

3. Building two new elementary schools would require the purchase of 17-18 homes and an inter-governmental agreement with the Village of Elmwood Park to acquire Mills Park. This would take up to six years to complete when the necessary property has been acquired. The logistics of new construction for two buildings would be building a new elementary school adjacent to John Mills Elementary School, moving the students and staff of Elmwood Elementary School to the new adjacent building from Mills, tear down and rebuild Elmwood Elementary School, move the students to their new destinations, and tear down John Mills Elementary School. The need for property is to have the necessary capacity to realize such a project. The cost of two new elementary buildings would be \$98 million, not including property.

There was a positive level of community support for renovating the two elementary buildings at about \$55 million, and a lower level of support for building one elementary school at about \$75 million. There was a concern expressed by parents and the community that renovating the two existing buildings would not be as much of a long-term investment in programming and facilities as the new single building would be. Building two new elementary schools had the lowest level of support due to the cost and logistics associated with the project.

Of those surveyed, 70% expressed favorable views of the district, 16% had negative views, and 14% had no opinion. Of the 16%, a plurality consisted of individuals who currently do not or never have had students enrolled in the district.

### Phase III: October-November 2019

Phase 3 is occurring this fall from October to November 2019. There will be additional Community Committee meetings, surveying, and Community Engagement Sessions.

The Community Engagement Sessions will be held on November 7 at 6:00 pm at John Mills Elementary School, on November 12 at 6:00 pm at Elmwood Elementary School, on November 13 at 6:00 pm at Elmwood Park High School, and on November 16 at 10:00 am at Elmwood Park High School.

An online and phone survey will be sent out to hear feedback about three specific options that have come from all of the data collected from the first two phases. Based on the data, the priority individual projects are: investing in safety and security and social and emotional health, exploring the possibility of investing in STEM labs and ADA accessibility, and eliminating pursuit of a wellness center and swimming pool. All other projects were supported but less so than the top priority projects.

Also from the data, the community strongly supports investing more in its schools, with consistently the least supported option being "no additional funding for

schools.” Through the phone survey, the public’s intuitive, or initial, response was to support a minimum level of funding, followed by the medium level, and then a significant drop-off for the maximum level of funding. Through online surveys, the medium level was the most popular, followed by the minimum level, and the maximum level once again saw a significant drop-off. At the Community Engagement Sessions, the medium and minimum levels tied for the most popular with the maximum

level, again, dropping off. The community committee ranked the max level highest, then the mid-level, then the minimum level.

### The Potential Options

Based on the feedback and guidance of the community throughout 2019, the district now has three final options for consideration. The three infrastructure improvement plans now before the community are:

**Option 1 – Renovating and expanding John Mills Elementary School and renovating Elmwood Elementary School. The cost is \$55 million with an average tax impact of \$550 on an average home value of \$235,000.**



**Option 2 – Renovating and expanding both John Mills Elementary School and Elmwood Elementary School. The cost is a range of \$70-75 million with an average tax impact of \$700-750 on the average home value of \$235,000.**



Current Elmwood Elementary School



Current John Mills Elementary School

Option 3 – Building a new community school to house all elementary students. The cost would be \$82 million with an average tax impact of \$820 on an average home value of \$235,000.



Further details and graphics will accompany each option moving forward. Any project involving renovations includes addressing all life safety projects and modernizing the existing structure.

It should be noted that the district's architectural and construction firms, DLA and ICI respectively, have stated repeatedly that due to the age of the buildings, Options 1 and 2 should be considered a "band-aid" and not a permanent solution. While a new building would still need regular maintenance, it would be less than two significantly older buildings and there would be savings associated with energy efficiency.

Of the ten projects identified from Phase 1 and ranked in Phase 2, Option 1 would address safety and security upgrades and music rooms. Through approval of the referendum, funds would be available in the district's operating budget to further trades and manufacturing partnerships and update athletic fields. Option 1 would not address STEM labs, full-day preschool, ADA accessibility at Elmwood Elementary School, and social-emotional health. Option 1 would see a four classroom addition at John Mills Elementary School on the west side of the building. Some parking spaces would be lost which would more than likely require some staff to park in the street, similar to what the staff do at Elmwood Elementary School.

Option 2 would address safety and security upgrades, music rooms, and ADA accessibility. Through approval of the referendum, funds would be available in the district's operating budget to further trades and manufacturing partnerships and update athletic fields. Option 2 would not address STEM labs, full-day preschool, and social-emotional health. To complete this project would require anywhere between 5-10 mobile classrooms for 18-24 months. The mobile classrooms are needed because each classroom touching the courtyard would be uninhabitable during construction. Between the mobile classrooms and the site capacity needed for the construction crew, students would not have access to the playground or green space during that time. The mechanical equipment would ultimately be located somewhere near the existing building, but would not be as large due to the efficiency of modern mechanical equipment.

It should also be stressed that per DLA and ICI, it should be anticipated that due to the age of the building, potential developments may occur that could increase costs and affect realizing the full scope of Option 2 or delay completion.

Option 3 would address safety and security upgrades, STEM labs, social and emotional health, music rooms, updating athletic fields, and ADA accessibility. Through approval of the referendum, funds would be available in the district's operating budget to further trades and manufacturing partnerships. Option 3 would not address

full-day pre-school. To complete this project, the district would need to purchase the 21 homes surrounding John Mills Elementary School and acquire Mills Park through an inter-governmental agreement with the Village of Elmwood Park. Purchase price, at minimum the current market value, and timeline to vacate property would be negotiated between the district and homeowners.

The accompanying conceptual designs are strictly a concept and not the actual. They were made to determine the feasibility of this option, and the proposed building has pre-school, ten general education classrooms for each grade level, more than enough classroom space for programs related to students with an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) and English Learner designation, two full-sized music/band rooms, two full-sized art rooms, two gyms with a stage, a two-level media center that can house classrooms for computer/technology classes, a pre-school playground, a large playground and play space for all students, two basketball courts, a soccer or ball field, and a significant amount of office space for staff. Again, note that these were all chosen to verify that this option could work; should the community choose to move forward with this option, the district would work collaboratively to determine exactly what to include in this new building and the surrounding spaces.

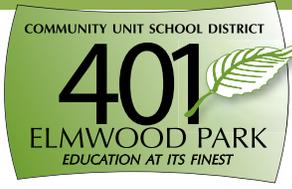
The building can house up to 1,600 students, planning for more than what is anticipated to be needed. There are two parent drop-off areas, 139 parking spaces for staff and visitors, and a full alleyway for buses. All students south of the train tracks would receive transportation. This would mean students on the south side would receive transportation for grades K-5 and students on the north side would receive transportation for grades 6-12.

Elmwood Elementary School would potentially become green space allowing for a ball field, up to two soccer fields, and a playground area. Again, the official plan for this space would be determined in collaboration with the community.

Those are the three options being put forward to the community. It has consistently been communicated through this community engagement process that any pursuit for additional funds from the community to improve upon the elementary schools should be considered an investment that will increase the value and standing of the district and community.

The average tax impact is considered to be a "raw" number because it does not take into consideration the possibility of receiving matching funds from the state through its capital improvement plan or obtaining grants. The district is using this conservative number to communicate what the average tax impact would be on the average value of a home should the district be unsuccessful at obtaining funding through other ventures.

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## In Conclusion

Regardless of which option moves forward to the Board of Education to be placed on the ballot for March 17, 2020, if any referendum would fail, there is no guarantee the district would try again. And if no referendum is successful, to do Option 1, which is the most basic of the three options and is primarily addressing life safety projects and modernizing the existing structures, would take at least a decade to complete, would completely max out the district's borrowing threshold, and consume the district's operations budget.

Superintendent Nicolas Wade stated that he, as always, is available to answer any questions, clarify information, or to hear general feedback. He can be reached at (708) 583-5831 or at [waden@epcusd401.org](mailto:waden@epcusd401.org).

**Please Share Your Thoughts!**

This process depends on your feedback.  
Please visit the referendum web page at  
<https://www.epcusd401.org/referenduminfo>

