

# WHICH WAY, 4J?

An analysis of school consolidation proposals

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**A**s an educator and as an architect, making the case against recommendations to improve Eugene's schools may seem difficult. Our children deserve the very best facilities and access to the highest quality education.

However, the recommendations in a recent 4J Facilities Master Plan study are so flawed that the case against them is quite easy to make.

In terms of building type, the recommendations ignore overwhelming research on the academic value of small schools and disregard the evidence supporting neighborhood schools. In terms of process, the evaluation metrics are skewed to justify new construction, the effort failed to account for citizen input, and the naïve hope for funding misinterprets Eugene politics.

The district is certainly in a bind. Administrators are running out of money to operate their 35 school buildings, yet many of these same buildings have so much deferred maintenance that the district now may be asking voters for money to either demolish or abandon and replace about 25 percent of its building stock. The recommendations call for the cash-strapped district to replace North Eugene High School and Roosevelt Middle School, as well as Willard and River Road elementary schools. It also calls for combining Howard and Corridor elementary schools into one large new building and doing the same for Edison and Camas Ridge.

The focus on new construction, however, seems odd given the recent round of layoffs, furlough days and program cuts the district has implemented. Granted, these are two separate pots of money (capital costs vs. operating costs), but to most taxpayers the distinction is largely irrelevant. The ambitious plan has little community support, which is unsurprising given the lack of community input in the plan's creation.

While the goal of ensuring that equitable resources exist for all Eugene students is laudable, the approach to achieving that goal needs to be based on broad community input. What is clearly missing is a facilities planning vision that can support the district's mission. As it stands, the "vision" the study seems to promulgate is for cost savings through consolidations, new buildings in place of old ones, and consolidated schools over neighborhood schools. But all three of these goals are based on myths, not reality.

## Myth: Consolidation saves money

*Reality:* This proposed construction and consolidation program will cost Eugene taxpayers an estimated \$186 million, not including financing costs on the three proposed bonds. This is \$100 million more than upgrading existing schools. If these buildings were repaired, the study determined the cost would be \$86 million (see figure 1). The consultant who prepared the study justifies this significant additional cost because the new schools are forecasted to cost up to \$700,000 a year less to operate. This fails, however, to account for the more than \$6 million annual bond repayment cost and the reduced operating costs of renovated schools. Spending \$6

million a year to save \$700,000 a year does not pass the commonsense test.

It is also a forecast that is most likely wrong. According to researchers at the University of Massachusetts, numerous studies over the last 50 years have "shown that over time consolidation has not resulted in any significant savings, and reductions in per-pupil costs have been very little if at all." These researchers did find that for the first year following consolidation administrative costs are lower, but this lasts for only one year "as larger organizations have a strong tendency toward creating more extensive and costly administrative bureaucracy within a few years."

The University of Massachusetts findings support a 1992 study by the Public Education Association of New York that examined existing research on school size and operational costs and concluded, "The premise that small schools are more expensive to operate has always been false." Educational researcher Stuart Grauer explains why this is the case: "Large schools actually exhibit diseconomies of scale: inefficiencies and increased costs that result from increases in administrative bureaucracy, security costs and transportation costs."

## Myth: Old school buildings cannot be effectively repaired

*Reality:* According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, school districts across the country from Spokane to Boise to Miami have remodeled old and historic schools with the very latest in computer technology, life-safety techniques and handicap accessibility. Sadly, demolition by neglect is a common tactic used by less enlightened districts. Such a tactic should not be rewarded in this era of sustainability. At the same time administrators are asking students to recycle newspapers, they should not be sending entire buildings to the landfill.

In reading the 4J study, it is abundantly clear that the problems are not building failures. The problems are maintenance failures that should be addressed by a more robust maintenance program rather than by demolition or abandonment. But the consultant preparing the study is well known for making recommendations in support of costly new construction. Three schools are good illustrative cases that expose the flaws in the study's methodology.

## Roosevelt Middle School

Built in 1950, Roosevelt does indeed have some flaws. The report found that the foundation at the band room is spalling (flaking), E wing is settling and has cracked walls, B wing's concrete floor has settled some, areas of brick need cleaning, wood soffits have moisture damage, the roof has blisters and leaks, the tile floors in some classrooms are cracked and stained, many interior walls need repair and painting, ceiling tiles are stained, most of the fixed equipment (lockers, bleachers, cabinets, etc.) is old and worn out, many plumbing fixtures, boilers, heat pumps, unit vents and radiators are at the end of their service life, there is no air conditioning (a fatal flaw perhaps in Texas but not in Eugene), some light fixtures are old, some exits lack handrails, and not all restrooms are