



POUDRE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Executive Summary
Focus Groups on Closing, Repurposing, Combining Schools
PSD Parent, Community & Staff Focus Groups

Conducted May 2009

Report: July 2009



Executive Summary
Focus Groups on Closing, Repurposing, Combining Schools
PSD Parent & Staff Focus Groups (May 2009; Report from July 2009)

Objective: PSD held focus groups of staff and parents in May to gather sentiments and perspectives on closing, combining, and/or repurposing schools. Focus groups were held as part of the information gathering and research phases of a one-year facility utilization study process, expected to culminate with recommendations and a decision in April 2010. The process will involve multiple committees representative of PSD stakeholders and extensive community engagement.

- I. **Stakeholder participants:** Parent/community focus groups included representatives from each neighborhood feeder system/geographic area of PSD; and demographic groups (parents, grade levels, non-parents, male, female, diversity, community members, senior citizens, and different geographic areas of the community). Staff focus groups included certified, classified, and administrative employees representing geographic areas of PSD, large and small schools, and elementary, middle and high school levels.
- II. **Role of facilitator:** The facilitator's role was to provide a safe place for these questions to be answered. The facilitator provided a transparent process by which this information could be brought to PSD. Facilitator provided a grouping of the comments from the various focus groups in the full report. No facilitator input is included in the full report or executive summary.
- III. **Summary format:** The full report prepared by the facilitator listed all responses stakeholders had to questions in order of most consensus to least for all 4 focus groups. The executive summary (below) summarizes comments in themes or areas for which strong support was shown in the consensus exercise. The executive summary does not include comments for which neutral or little/no support was shown in the consensus exercise.

Questions and Summary Comments:

1. **What's driving heightened awareness/discussion about school closure?**
 - **Most groups identified all these themes** and using the "thumbs up" voting process, showed strong agreement (number mentioning this theme in parenthesis): Grade level changes (4 of 4), Adoption of Student-Based Budgeting, or SBB (3 of 4); Economy (3 of 4); Budget/funding levels (3 of 4); School Choice/Enrollment (3 of 4); Changing neighborhoods (2 of 4).
2. **What are your feelings about closing small schools?**
 - **Theme: support for closing schools:** Strong agreement (using thumbs up) to the following statements, **across all 4 groups:** is fiscally responsible, may have to consolidate, ok if in best interests of kids/community, emotional though we may still have to close one; hurtful but necessary; painful but students as a whole may be better off.
 - **Theme: don't support closing schools (2 of 4 mentioned this):** strong support for liking small schools/they benefit children; encourage and support small schools; and physical plant costs same to run if 200 or 500 attend school.

- **Theme: Concerns about closing (2 of 4):** strong support for fear, heart of the community; distrust of administration (they don't think it's beneficial to have small schools); lower income students getting quality education; may be temporary and just need to reopen later; worried social class and status will be used as criteria to close; Mountain schools unique and a long way to transport students.
- **Theme: Recommendations about closing (4 of 4):** Be responsible to taxpayers; run schools optimally; bigger not always better; project enrollment accurately so you don't have to re-open.
- **Theme: Questions about closing (2 of 4):** Would you sell the school? What is the plan when you close a school? What benefits the kids most?

3. What are your feelings about combining schools?

- **Theme: Support combining schools (3 of 4 groups):** 2 in one building, under same leadership very successful; better to combine than close; different age groups in one building ok.
- **Theme: Against combining schools (2 of 4):** Compete due to SBB; combining is the same as closing if a school goes to another location.
- **Theme: concerns/recommendations about combining (2 of 4):** be careful because of animosity (unwelcome, invaded, space issues) between combined schools; if combined, they need to "unite" identities and philosophies or problems will ensue.
- **Questions about combining:** What is the actual cost savings? Is it efficient for one principal to run 2 schools/programs?

4. What are your feelings about repurposing schools?

- **Theme: against repurposing (1 of 4):** Stupid, it doesn't save money; doesn't make sense to repurpose and use building for another purpose; no savings.
- **Theme: support repurposing (3 of 4):** support if it brings income; ok if provides a good alternative program; advantage is easier to re-open if enrollment shifts again; support if magnet program created; better to repurpose than leave it empty.
- **Theme: concerns/recommendations about repurposing (4 of 4):** stay in business of education vs. real estate; don't repurpose for sake of repurposing; consider cost of keeping building open vs. just moving people around; consider the costs of repurposing; empty facility could be used for consolidating district programs as opposed to being sold.

5. Given what you have just heard (short presentation to each group on the Small Schools Study findings/recommendations and current enrollment statistics), do you think PSD needs to close schools? Why or why not?

- **Theme: Yes (3 of 4):** Yes, if it's going to negatively impact the mill/bond election; yes, given 80% utilization of buildings.
- **Theme: No (2 of 4):** Small schools are better, more effective to serve some populations; find more creative solutions to budget issues.
- **Theme: not enough information to say yes or no (3 of 4):** don't know what you will do with empty buildings; not enough information to decide

6. Do you think the recommendations described in the Small Schools Study are appropriate and useful in determining whether or not to combine, repurpose or close schools? Why or why not?

Why study findings <u>are</u> appropriate	Why study findings <u>are not</u> appropriate
<p>Calls for each school to be looked at on a case-by-case basis</p> <p>Respect for recommendations because process was good and fair</p> <p>All criteria in study should be considered</p> <p>Appropriate, but study findings are not the only criteria that should be considered</p> <p>Like the criteria in the study</p> <p>Like it all</p> <p>District should decide minimum baseline of services that every student must receive, then evaluate total distribution of resources to meet that need. This should be the first step before determining how best to allocate funds to meet those baseline needs; distribute resources equitably</p>	<p>Need to also consider school choice: why are 30% of students choosing other schools? Factor this into decision to close/not close schools (emphasized by multiple groups)</p> <p>Does not address issues specific to Mountain Schools</p> <p>Need to add more information (research) on enrollment projections</p> <p>Need to add middle school performance scores based on model of education from elementary schools</p> <p>For schools meeting all the closure criteria, there's always more to the story than the study shows; have concerns these schools would never be closed because of other concerns</p> <p>Need to consider finances/economics as well</p>

Other comments with strong support shown:

- Listen to all voices—some school communities know how to lobby, others don't
- Need more information on study findings before deciding if appropriate
- Study needs more work

7. If you agree with the criteria established in the Small Schools Study about size and achievement levels, then how supportive would you be to close schools?

- Supportive, if done on a case-by-case basis (1 of 4)
- Not supportive, based on the study (1 of 4)
- 2 groups declined answering the question (thought question confusing, needed more information on study results, etc.)

8. If a decision were made to close schools, what would help parents and community members through a process of closing, combining or repurposing a school?

- **Theme:** conduct an honest, open, transparent, unhurried process, educate and communicate with families about options, and explain how decision will be made (4 of 4 groups listed comments related to the process)
- **Theme:** provide other options for parents to choose schools, time to make decisions, and have input in their new school (4 of 4 groups listed offering options to families)

- **Theme:** hold forums or neighborhood meetings early in the process before decision is made, and use the input in decision-making (2 of 4 groups)
- **Theme:** when a decision is made, explain how it will benefit kids and why the decision has been made (2 of 4 groups)
- **Theme:** take cost savings and give funds to other schools, share equitably (2 of 4 groups)

9. What do you think would help staff through a process of closing, combining or repurposing a school? This questions was directed only to 2 staff groups, and support expressed for the following:

- Include staff as part of the process
- Honor and listen to staff
- Establish and share the timeline, and stick to it
- Pay to move classrooms, pay for hours to move, and help with transportation