



Blue Ribbon 2019 FAQ

Revised 3/18/19

The purpose of this document is to provide the community a transparent and clear set of answers to questions regarding the work of the Blue Ribbon Committee. This document will be updated as new questions are posed.

The best way to become informed about this process is to review the various Blue Ribbon Committee documents that have been posted on the district [website](#).

1. I just heard from a neighbor about the district possibly closing schools in the future. What is that all about?

Since the completion of our District Strategic Plan in 2015, the district has been closely focusing attention on various metrics including enrollment, finances and educational outcomes. Numerous presentations have been made at Board of Education meetings and discussions have been had both with/among the Board as well as with/among the community. The best way a community member can become informed about the work of the Blue Ribbon Committee is to review all of the documents posted under the Blue Ribbon Committee tab on the district website.

The short version is as follows. Due to declining enrollment the Board of Education directed administration to create a process that would identify both financial efficiencies as well as educational benefits for students via a plan to reconfigure schools. Due to declining enrollment and the need to ensure high quality educational opportunities to all students the District is in the process of considering closing schools in the future. Any closure enacted would not take place until the 2020-21 school year at the earliest.

2. Is enrollment declining?

Yes. GPPSS has been averaging 100 fewer students per year for the past 10 years. That [decline is projected to continue](#) through 2025 (SEMCOG, Plante Moran Cresa). With per pupil funding at about \$10,000 per student, that equals \$1 million in revenue loss each year.

3. If the District reconfigured schools would high school boundaries change?

No. The current North and South boundaries would remain unchanged.

4. Why is enrollment declining?

There are three main factors contributing to enrollment decline:

- 1) people are having fewer children
- 2) people are having children later in life, and
- 3) people are living longer in their homes.

There is also no incentive with Michigan property tax structure to downsize. GPPSS is not alone, particularly among peer districts that are built out (no new homes being built on former farms), and where the demographics show older populations who no longer have children in public schools (Birmingham, Bloomfield). Also, many families moved out of Michigan during the economic downturn seeking employment.

5. School Funding 101

Here is a [short article that provides a clear description of how funding for education changed fundamentally in 1994 with Proposal A](#).

Essentially, before Proposal A passed, what was raised locally for education stayed here for the Grosse Pointe Public School System. Since Proposal A, the majority of our taxes go to the state, and come back on a per pupil basis. With enrollment decreasing, school funding decreases also. Districts like ours that spent more per pupil than the agreed upon minimum in 1994 were allowed to pass a Hold Harmless tax, (which must be renewed periodically and is on the November 2019 ballot) to stay at that pre-Proposal A level. For us the Hold Harmless and Sinking Fund on the November 2019 ballot make up 25% of our budget.

Please see the [Plante Moran Cresa presentation on GPPSS Finances](#) at the February 14 meeting for more financial data.

6. Could community charitable contributions help offset the current financial shortfall?

Yes. GPPSS is fortunate to have an active and dedicated [Grosse Pointe Foundation for Public Education](#) (GPFPE) that tirelessly works to raise funds for our District. In a typical year this foundation is able to provide approximately \$120,000 that is used for specific projects and programs that fit with the mission of the GPFPE. The GPFPE is open to expanding fundraising options, but at this time is not able to commit funds to cover the cost of declining enrollment. Per the bylaws of the GPFE they do not support operational costs of the District.

7. Why not sell fields/other buildings instead of closing schools?

The Board of Education is open to this and has sold several properties over the past few decades. Many know that GPPSS closed Barnes Elementary in the 1980s when enrollment last dropped to this level; Barnes has since been reopened as an Early Childhood Center. However, fewer remember that GPPSS also closed two buildings and reduced several facilities since the 1970's. One was the Instructional Materials Center (old Kerby School behind GP Farms administration building on Kerby.) That was a large building that housed instructional material, copying and printing equipment, and Community Education classes. GPPSS also sold the

Superintendent's House located between Christ Church and Grosse Pointe South by the Grosse Pointe Boulevard parking lot. GPPSS also sold the parking lot that is now owned by Kroger, next to Maire field. GPPSS also sold a section of the Elworthy Field to Grosse Pointe for a parking lot. The Elworthy field lease was a 50-year lease and is up for re-negotiation within three years. Deed restrictions exist regarding Elworthy Field that restrict future use of this property. GPPSS also sold a section of the field at Richard on Kercheval to Grosse Pointe Farms which was converted to a parking lot. In addition, by default, the Central Library branch was taken off GPPSS books and transferred to the Public Library when the library became their own entity in the mid 1990's.

8. Why not sell the Administration building (389)?

Every reconfiguration proposal includes the sale/lease of the administration building (affectionately referred to as 389 for the street address on St. Clair) with staff moving into school building(s). At the most recent Board of Education meeting and the most recent Blue Ribbon Committee Meeting there was unanimous support for taking this action.

9. Is the district losing more students to private and parochial schools?

No. The percentage of students who choose to attend private and parochial schools remains steady around 9%. The majority of local private and parochial schools have also experienced a similar decline in enrollment, and/or have increased their number of students from outside the public school district boundaries. See page 26 of the [Enrollment Presentation January 31, 2019](#) for private/parochial figures.

10. How were members of the Blue Ribbon Committee identified?

The initial Blue Ribbon Committee was constituted in the Fall of 2017. It was comprised of a cross section of stakeholders that includes parents, community members and employees. Initially, the members of the committee were recommended by individual Board of Education members and building administrators. When the committee was called back to service in January to study reconfiguration work each of the original Blue Ribbon Committee members were asked to return to service on the committee. Most of the members were able to rejoin. In cases when a member could not return the superintendent identified a replacement. Currently the committee has a broad range of participants that includes stakeholders from each building in GPPSS. [For a full list of current members please follow this link.](#)

11. Who is on the Blue Ribbon Committee?

The Blue Ribbon Committee was first formed in 2017. All of those who participated in that 2017 process were asked to return. Most did. Then additional community members were invited to serve to ensure a broad representation of parents, teachers, support staff and administration. Each school building is represented. There are also members on the committee who never had, or no longer have, children in our public schools. Many people wear multiple hats (example: parents with children in our schools who also work for GPPSS, board members who no longer have children in our schools, etc.). A list of members is on the [Blue Ribbon Committee](#) page on the website, but remember these are volunteers so the list may change over time.

12. How can I participate in the Blue Ribbon process?

Like the Strategic Plan and the prior Blue Ribbon Plan, the Blue Ribbon committee is one step in a process that allows for many levels of participation.

- All **committee meetings are open to the public** and observation is encouraged. See #12 below for dates, times and locations.
- All [Blue Ribbon materials](#) are posted on the district website.
- **Emails** may be sent to schoolboard@gpschools.org
- **Letters** may be sent to School Board, 389 St. Clair, Grosse Pointe 48230
- **Town Halls** will be held throughout April and May at various dates, times and locations
- **Public comments** (3 minutes) may be made at school board meetings.
- **Visit** Superintendent Niehaus at the administration building or call 313-432-3003.

13. When does the Blue Ribbon Committee meet?

The remaining Blue Ribbon Committee date is:

- Thursday, March 28, Brownell MultiPurpose Room 6-9 p.m.

14. When are Board meetings held?

If you would like to make a public comment at a board meeting or observe their updates, school board meeting dates include:

- Monday, March 25, 7 p.m., Brownell MultiPurpose Room (park behind building)
- Monday, April 8, 7 p.m., Brownell MultiPurpose Room (park behind building)
- Monday, April 22, 7 p.m., Brownell MultiPurpose Room (park behind building)
- Monday, May 13, 7 p.m., Brownell MultiPurpose Room (park behind building)
- Monday, May 20*, 7 p.m., Brownell MultiPurpose Room (off schedule due to holiday)
- Monday, June 10, 7 p.m., Brownell MultiPurpose Room (park behind building)
- Monday, June 24, 7 p.m., Brownell MultiPurpose Room (park behind building)

15. What is the timeline for implementation?

Following is the timeline for the organization and work of this committee:

- January 15th - January 30th - Committee membership finalized
- February 1st - March 30th - Committee meetings led by a professional facilitator
- April 8th - GPPSS Blue Ribbon Reconfiguration Report provided to the BOE
- April 9th - May 30th - Community town hall meetings and feedback
- June 2019 - The BOE to consider the recommendations from the committee
- June 2019 - The BOE would recommend a Reconfiguration Plan with options

16. What is the charge of the Blue Ribbon Committee?

At the January 14 Board of Education meeting, this was the charge presented to the Blue Ribbon Committee:

“Propose a reconfiguration plan for facility usage and grade configuration to be implemented in GPPSS starting no earlier than the **2020-21 school year**. This plan should consider all relevant factors identified by the committee including meeting the target of substantial structural financial savings. However, the best interest of students and **focusing on expanding opportunities for all students while maintaining excellence** shall be at the center of the committee’s work. The plan should be specific including identifying facilities and options.”

17. How is the agenda for an individual Blue Ribbon Committee meeting developed?

The initial Blue Ribbon Committee meeting was focused on sharing with the committee the demographic data, the enrollment data, and the options that had previously been shared with the Board of Education. The agenda for subsequent meetings has been developed based on the information requested by the committee during the preceding meeting.

18. What is a Gravity School?

During the initial Blue Ribbon Committee meetings the committee discussed the concept of a Gravity School. A subcommittee of this group composed of educators from the larger committee made some specific recommendations at the March 7th Blue Ribbon Committee meeting as follows:

- The Gravity School would be called The Grosse Pointe School of Collaboration and Inquiry.
- The committee provided detailed information regarding the mechanics of how students would be admitted to this school and how staff would be selected. Detailed information is available in the [Gravity School Concept Outline](#).
- The committee outlined the learning focus and pedagogy that would be used at this school. Please see the [GPPSS Gravity School Presentation](#) and [GPPSS Companion Document](#).

A gravity school is a school that provides a specific program or approach to education that would be open to students on a district-wide basis. Gravity schools would not have a neighborhood defined attendance area.

19. In the document titled [GPPSS Gravity School Concept Outline](#) the admissions procedures reference that a local clergy member or public safety official will conduct the actual student lottery. Why?

When the District has used a student lottery in the past, including for Young Five’s, GPPSS has asked a non-employee community member who has a high ethical standing to physically conduct the lottery. This is done so that everyone can have confidence that the lottery is fair.

20. The Board of Education asked this committee to consider the educational benefits of reconfiguration. Have those benefits been identified?

Yes. The same subset of educators on the Blue Ribbon Committee identified the following benefits of reconfiguring the district to have fewer buildings as follows:

- Increased curricular choices in terms of scheduling and opportunities for students
- Increased viability of course offerings at multiple buildings and time of day
- Decreased tracking of students throughout the day
- Decrease in number of split classrooms at the elementary level
- Increased opportunity to spread students across multiple classrooms
- Increased balance within class sizes
- Maintained current Board parameters around class size
- Increased opportunities for student/teacher relationship through decrease in staff traveling
- Increased opportunities for staff collaboration through decrease in amount of staff travel between buildings

21. What about School of Choice?

Our school board remains opposed to School of Choice.

22. What actions has the BOE taken in the past to reduce expenditures?

- All staff took pay cut (~10%)
- All bargaining groups agreed to increased health care cost sharing 80/20
- Triangulation – families must enroll/verify residency by May 1 to ensure attendance at neighborhood school (saved ~\$100,000)
- Energy Costs - Use alternate provider for electrical
- Changed to consistent process outsourcing hall monitors, substitutes
- Created partnership to provide secondary summer school
- Required School Service Fund and Food Service Fund be break even/profitable

23. What revenue enhancement actions has the Board taken in the past?

- Passed \$111 million bond for capital projects to keep students safe, warm, dry & connected
- Renewed Hold Harmless and Sinking Fund Millages (up in November 2019) ~25% of budget
- Increased Athletic Fees – by \$100/sport for High School, \$27 for Middle School
- Increased Preschool Tuition Fees to ensure program was self-funding
- Increased Building Usage Fees, Marketing and Oversight
- Permitted attendance of children of staff (separate from School of Choice legislation)
- Created Grosse Pointe Foundation for Public Education (bylaws do not support salaries or capital projects but grants take pressure off general fund)

24. Would the expansion of fee based preschool assist or solve the financial challenges of GPPSS?

During the past four years GPPSS has worked diligently to increase the enrollment in our fee based preschool program and address financial shortfalls within the program. Due to intentional

efforts to bring the program to cost neutral, the program has gone from operating a \$200,000 annual deficit, to operating a small surplus (approximately \$80,000.) This surplus is used by the program to meet the capital needs of this program. This financial turnaround was a function of several actions including nearly doubling enrollment, increasing tuition and changing financial practices. Typically, each year GPPSS has a waitlist for infant and toddler slots in this program, but adding infant and toddler rooms would not create additional profit for the District. Currently, all classrooms at Barnes that can legally be used for 0 - 5 year old children (first floor rooms only) are currently all being used. An expansion of this program would potentially allow for additional infant and toddler rooms; however due to infant and toddler rooms needing to be on the first floor there is no longer space at Barnes. What that said, any increase to infant, toddler or preschool classrooms will not significantly alter the financial status of the fee based preschool program or the District.

Added 3/11/19

25. The bond passed. So why does the district need to close schools?

GPPSS is grateful for the community support that passed our November 2018 bond to keep students safe, warm, dry and connected. Those funds are highly regulated and can only be used for the purposes specified in the bond language. They cannot be used for salaries or other operating expenses.

26. Will bond funds be spent on schools that are closing?

As described in the Town Halls and materials shared prior to the election, the bond will be issued in two series. The first series has been sold and will focus on the high schools (determined through the 2017 Blue Ribbon Committee and subsequent Town Halls to NOT be closing). The South secure vestibule will be done this summer, with the rest of South scheduled for 2020. North will follow in 2021. The goal is to identify a few additional school buildings that will not close by April, so that projects can be bid in a cost-effective manner and begin in conjunction with the high school projects. This may allow bundling of raw material purchases or economy of scale through utilization of the same work crew. Once school closing decisions are made in June of 2019, the rest of the projects can be planned and scheduled; then the second series of the bond will be sold for those projects (planned for sale in 2021). So, no, the goal is to not spend any bond money on schools that will close. The only caveat would be if there is a catastrophic failure (boiler, roof) that must be addressed within the 2019-20 school year when students are still in that school. We must keep students safe, warm, and dry.

27. Why is the Gravity School proposal for grades 3-8?

By using that 3-8 configuration, GPPSS could keep additional traditional elementary schools open and the remaining two traditional middle schools would be at an optimal number for scheduling. It also allows for the use of three cohort models with grades 3-4, 5-6, and 7-8 in the instructional design. Please see the [GPPSS Gravity School Presentation](#) and [GPPSS Companion Document](#) shared at the March 7 Blue Ribbon Committee Meeting in response to committee questions.

28. Would students be forced to attend the Gravity School?

No. There would be an application and lottery process as described in the [Gravity School Concept Outline](#).

29. What if the Gravity School doesn't fill?

The subcommittee did a great deal of research about programs as they compiled their preliminary proposal. The problem in peer districts, when similar programs were implemented, was not a lack of enrollment, but a waiting list. The district will use parent input from the Town Halls to ascertain interest and further develop and refine the Grosse Pointe School for Collaboration and Inquiry proposal, thereby avoiding a lack of enrollment should the board approve it as part of the reconfiguration plan.

30. What will you do to ensure the Gravity School is equitable?

The Gravity School is not a magnet or gifted program. It is designed to be open to all students who can access a Free and Public Education within its instructional design. Students with special education needs are welcome. It will not be provided resources greater than those at other GPPSS schools, and certain traditional aspects (yet to be determined) will not be provided at the Gravity School to allow for implementation of the focus area. As the school will share the same strong GPPSS curriculum, all students that matriculate to our high schools shall be prepared to be successful within the traditional high school structure. The Gravity School will not use a preferential system with respect to admissions (no test in or sibling preference), but shall use a weighted admissions system that attempts to provide equity based on the student's home elementary school. For admissions details, please read the [Gravity School Outline](#).

31. Will transportation be provided?

No. GPPSS does not provide transportation for general education. It does not transport for preschool, or magnet, or for students who take high school courses while in middle school, or high school courses offered at the opposite high school. Transportation is not part of this proposal as it would negate a large portion of the cost savings.

32. What is capacity?

The industry standard for capacity is 80-85%. The capacity of our buildings was first presented in 2017, then revisited this winter with additional developments such as the introduction of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) at the middle school. For example, BYOD allows some computer labs to now be open for classroom instruction. Please see [Slide 6 of the Savings and Capacity Presentation to BRC March 7](#) for the updated capacity figures for each GPPSS school building.

33. What formal action did the Board of Education take to begin the Blue Ribbon Committee process?

As part of the development of the bond proposal in 2018, the [Board of Education passed a resolution](#) in June 2018 creating a series of triggers that would require administration to develop a process and a plan to reconfigure schools. Committee and Town Hall input were used to

develop the formal board resolution. This action was taken to ensure responsible use of potential bond funds.

Added 3/18/19

34. Has the District taken any action to verify that the enrollment projections from Plante Moran Cresa are accurate?

Yes, GPPSS has requested that the [Middle Cities Education Association](#) conduct an enrollment projection for GPPSS. This new projection will be used in conjunction with the Plante Moran Cresa projection to develop a final projection. SEMCOG data was also reviewed and showed similar projections to PMC. Please note that current reconfiguration actions will be designed to address the drop in enrollment the district has already experienced, and are not solely based on projected enrollment figures.

35. At what grade level has enrollment loss been most pronounced?

GPPSS has been experiencing enrollment loss for the past 17 years. Please see slide 23 and 39 of this [enrollment presentation](#) for a historical review of the enrollment loss. Another way to look at the GPPSS enrollment loss is to compare the class of graduating seniors with the class of kindergartners that replaces that class. The 2018-19 class of graduating seniors had 583 students enrolled when they were 1st graders twelve years ago. In contrast, the 2018-19 class of current 1st graders had 472 students. The chart on page 17 of the [October 12, 2017 class size presentation](#) highlights this change over time.

36. How is total building capacity determined at the elementary school level?

The [September 17, 2017 presentation to the Blue Ribbon Committee](#) starting on slide 33 notes how Plante Moran Cresa calculated building capacity. Plante Moran Cresa walked each building and counted full sized classrooms. Each full sized classroom was considered to be able to accommodate 25 students. At the elementary school level when calculating building capacity Plante Moran Cresa excluded music, art, media center and computer lab spaces from their calculations. At the middle school level Plante Moran Cresa did not count computer labs as spaces within the capacity calculations.

37. Were classrooms that were not being used as general education classrooms included in the capacity numbers from Plante Moran Cresa?

Yes. Plante Moran Cresa counted full sized classrooms as being eligible to accommodate 25 students. Many buildings use full sized classrooms for purposes other than 25 general education students. These uses include teacher lounges, special education classrooms, and individual or small group work rooms to support students.

38. Will final recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Committee account for and provide appropriate space for special education students?

Absolutely, yes. Any final recommendation regarding district reconfiguration from the Blue Ribbon Committee will include appropriate space at school buildings to provide excellent programming for all students including students with special needs.

39. How would a 5-8 middle school expand options for middle school students?

Enrollment in 6th-8th grades has dropped. Elective courses run based on actual enrollment. When there are fewer students to choose courses, fewer courses meet the minimum threshold to run. This leads to large class sections in those that do run, and students being forced to take second and third choice electives.

If fifth graders were added to the middle schools, they would provide a larger body of students selecting electives, which means more options could run. Because of the logical progression of courses, 5th and 6th graders would be more likely to be grouped together, but students would also have greater opportunities for advanced and remedial options within their own school building.

40. Would 5th and 8th grade students regularly interact in a 5 - 8 setting?

As GPPSS currently does, it would work to ensure a healthy learning environment that is age appropriate socially and educationally. This could and likely would, include alternate schedules, lunch times, recess times, and a specific location (wing) within a building for students that attend the 5-8 schools. In many schools that house 5th-8th grade students the younger students are not scheduled on a traditional bell schedule, and instead are scheduled much more similarly to how 5th graders are scheduled now. Most of the time, 5th grade students will interact with similarly-aged peers, but when beneficial, have access to increased electives and educational opportunities available to 6th-8th graders. GPPSS will continue to work to individualize instruction to meet each student's needs. The 5th graders would benefit from increased opportunities to attend and engage with non-core (specials) classes available at the 5th-8th grade school setting.

41. How would Title 1 support for students potentially be impacted by closure or reconfiguration?

Title 1 is a federal program administered by the State of Michigan that is intended to provide support to at-risk students. GPPSS receives an allotment of Title 1 funds (approximately \$440,000 annually) for this program. These funds are used for services at specific buildings based on the percentage of students being eligible for free or reduced price lunch. It is important to note, that the total Title 1 funding for GPPSS (approximately \$440,000) is a fixed amount regardless of how many buildings receive Title 1 services. For at least the past 10 years GPPSS has been providing Title 1 services to Poupard, Mason and Defer. These buildings are determined by a formula set by Michigan Department of Education in consultation with GPPSS. In the event that reconfiguration and or building closures would impact one of these three schools, GPPSS would still receive the fixed amount of money (approximately \$440,000) and would work with MDE to service students based on their need and eligibility.