

School board considers “school within a school” to solve district’s facility problems

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Six months after receiving the facilities assessment which recommended replacing pretty much everything in the Grand County School District except the high school, the Grand County Board of Education is considering a plan which would consolidate grades kindergarten through six into a new building, and create a new vocational education center.

The board has been meeting weekly, often with architects from MHTN, the firm that created the facilities assessment, to review the options for recreating the school district. With three schools recommended for replacement they have the freedom of a relatively clean slate, but the restriction of an uncertain budget – the board will need to go to voters to bond for the new construction.

The biggest consideration is the district’s configuration, that is, which grades will go in which buildings, and where those buildings will be located. That affects quality of education, so the board conducted a district-wide staff survey to learn what teachers and support staff feel works in Grand County.

“They were in favor of the current configuration, which means a [kindergarten through third grade, fourth grade through sixth grade] kind of setting, but there was a lot of discussion about combining on one campus into a school within a school, into pods,” Grand County School District Superintendent Margaret Hopkin said.

The concept involves physically grouping grades into different parts of a building, with separate wings to accommodate different levels. While that’s a big physical change from the current configuration, school board member Jim Webster said the school within a school maintains the current philosophy.

“We only have one town in this valley, and we want to keep these kids together,” he said. “That’s the concept of the current configuration: all of these kids are going to school together, from kindergarten on.”

School size has been a main point of discussion. Hopkin said there has been a trend toward smaller schools, especially in large urban areas where schools have grown very large. However, she said the solution often involves the school within a school concept.

For the proposed Grand County elementary school, the challenge is different – it’s bringing schools together, not breaking them apart. Hopkin stressed that even though that’s the case, the district will seek to maintain a small-school feel and an age appropriate environment.

“We want to make sure the pods are really separate; that they have their separate playgrounds, pick-up and drop-off zones and all of that,” she said.

Part of the reason for the consolidated school is cost. “The cost savings would be close to \$6 million if we build one big school as opposed to two smaller schools,” Hopkin said.

The project will see further savings because of logistics. “One advantage to this project is it will not disrupt ongoing classes, because we have enough room to build, enough space to put a school in while the other one is there. That’s huge—we save \$1.5 million to \$2 million dollars because we don’t have to buy and set up and run portable schools,” Webster said.

The district did consider a number of other options, but none addressed the needs for facilities for so many grade levels, as well as a vocational facility, within the same budget, with the exception of renovation.

“We’ve talked a lot about the pros and cons of renovation, and why renovate or not. We thought we’d go to the community and say, ‘renovation is an option’, but in reality it is not an option,” Hopkin said. “When you look at the cost effectiveness of the thing, we end up paying about 75 percent of the cost of a new building, and you still have an old building. To be fiscally responsible, that’s not an idea to put out there.”

The district will hold community input

sessions, likely in January, to discuss how to implement the plan, and to determine what needs the community would like to see addressed. In addition to ideas for the new elementary school, the district will seek input on the vocational center, which should also serve the broader community.

“We’re starting to talk to Moab city about partnering with the city and higher education, and if we end up with some partnering on the vo-tech center, it may end up as more of a community learning center,” Hopkin said, adding that this could help diffuse costs. “Then we may end up having funding from different places, and it wouldn’t all have to come out of the bond.”