

# Enhancing Opportunities for Our Kids' Future



## How realigning schools improves education.

When the School Board voted in June on a plan to realign the district, it sought to accomplish several things for the residents of St. Louis County. The plan now up for a December 8 public vote was developed to not only save millions of dollars and ensure the district's continued operation, its implementation will provide many new opportunities for our young people's education.

### Better learning spaces and materials.

- Classrooms wired with advanced technology for computers, projection, recording, online learning, real-time interaction with distant learning/teaching resources, and the like.
- Up-to-date textbooks and learning materials.
- Flexible laboratory spaces for sciences, shops, and technical activities.
- Computer access for every student as a basic tool for learning.

### Learning centered on individual students.

- Personalized learning in which each student has his/her own Individual Learning Plan guiding their education.
- Advisors regularly working with individual students, communicating with parents.
- Enrichment and remedial programs and support available to all students geared to their Individual Learning Plans.
- Learning that is growth oriented and achievement based.

### Focus on life skills.

- Students will graduate with mastery of key life-career skills including work skills, social skills, interpersonal interaction, basic living skills (homemaking, household/consumer finance, healthy lifestyle choices, problem solving, critical thinking, etc.).
- Career exploration will be a constant factor as students create and revise their Individual Learning Plans.

### Expanded elementary level programming.

- Solid basic skills as foundation for all future learning.
- Combination of primary teacher with departmentalized (by subject) programming.
- Provision of advanced mathematics and science offerings.
- Third graders as fluent readers.
- Learning at student's pace.
- Active intervention and support.
- Computer skills consistently presented and achieved across district.
- Life / career exploration.
- Character education.
- Outdoor education.
- Fine arts.
- Languages including Spanish and Ojibwemowin.

### Solid core programming.

- Students will be expected to achieve state standards.
- Core programming will include: Language Arts, Sciences, Social Studies, and Mathematics.

### Enhanced potential for electives.

With greater resources available for programming, the district will be able to greatly expand its offerings to include dozens of modern courses. From forensic science to economics, from computer programming to graphic arts, the children of our district will have unprecedented opportunities in language arts, social studies, mathematics and sciences.

**Look inside for the impact on your personal taxes.**

*Small schools with big opportunities – Where everybody is somebody!*



## Tax implications of voting yes or no on December 8.

The School Board has set Tuesday, December 8, as the date for district residents to vote on a plan to invest \$78.8 million in consolidating and improving our schools. In effect, the voters' decision could determine if the school district remains in operation or dissolves.

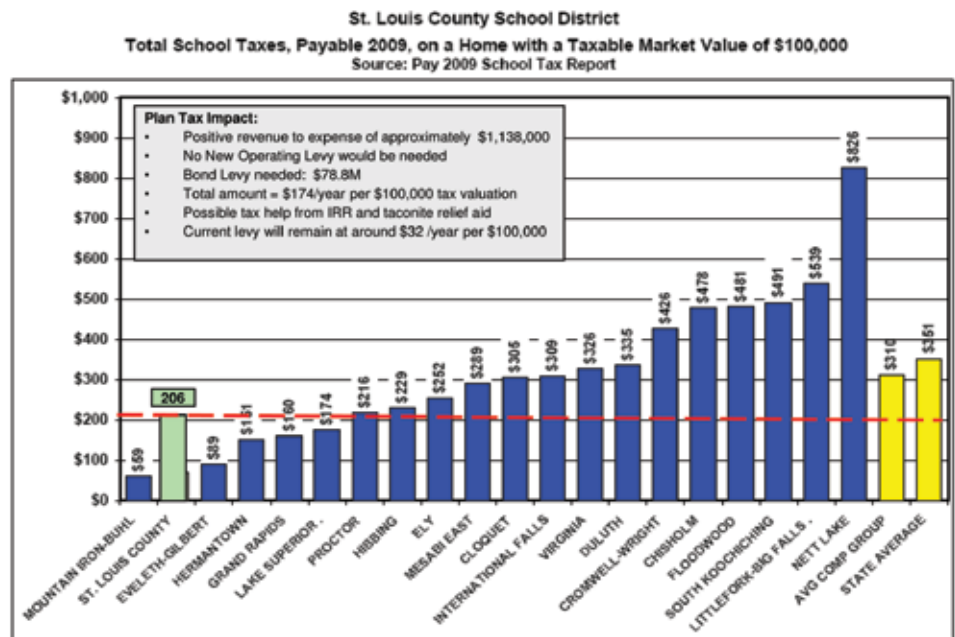
That's because with declining enrollment, inefficient buildings, higher operating costs and many other financial concerns, the district can no longer afford to operate all our buildings. For years the district has made cuts and sacrifices to delay this step, but unfortunately we've run out of Band-Aid solutions.

If passed, the implementation would be funded by a property tax increase of \$14 per month for every \$100,000 of home value, less homestead and other tax credits, for the next 20 years.

However, if residents vote no, their taxes will most likely still increase – in some cases, by a large amount. That's because if the plan is not approved, the school district would enter into "statutory operating debt" by June 2011, which means the State of Minnesota recognizes that the school district can no longer balance its expenditures and revenues, and would need to dissolve. Children in this school district would then go to neighboring school districts.

Yet everyone will be impacted, even if you don't have students in the public schools. You'll then be paying the taxes of the nearest district. Right now, our taxes in the St. Louis County School District – at \$68 annually for a \$100,000 home – are significantly lower than they are in neighboring districts.

The chart to the right shows that if a "yes" vote passes this fall, taxes on a \$100,000 home would increase to just over \$200 per year – again, less your tax credits. If a "no" vote passes, you'll likely be paying taxes of the district shown here that's nearest to your home. In addition, your ability to influence decisions in that new district would undoubtedly be reduced, because the majority of voters would be located right in that neighboring city.



\* The above figures do not include the impact of the homestead credit or disparity reduction aid, which will decrease the school portion of property taxes by varying amounts.

## 93% of us say it's too expensive to keep 7 schools

The scientific survey conducted in August confirmed what the school board has heard from residents in the past couple of years – it's time to make major changes to how the district operates. With a margin of error of 5.0 percent, similar to that found in many state and national polls, the survey is a statistically valid representation of how all adults feel within the district.

While the entire research findings may be reviewed in the district office or viewed online at [www.isd2142.k12.mn.us](http://www.isd2142.k12.mn.us), here are some of the highlights:

- **93%** said it is too expensive to keep operating seven schools with the district's enrollment now at 2,000 students.
- **89%** said we need to make some major change in how we operate our schools.
- **88%** prefer that the district implement the right plan, not the cheapest or fastest plan.
- **81%** said it is important to keep the St. Louis County School District together, instead of allowing it to be broken apart.
- **72%** said we need to make a decision on restructuring soon; if we wait another year or two to act, it may be too late to save our school district.

Of four options for how the district should be structured in the future:

- **62%** said the best plan is the plan now under consideration – to consolidate to five schools by remodeling three existing schools and building two new ones, thus saving the district \$5 million each year.
- **14%** preferred closing three to five schools to save \$4 million.
- **7%** preferred keeping all seven schools open and trying to pass a new \$3 million operating levy (\$1 million in additional operational and programming cuts would still need to be made).
- **6%** said the best option was to allow the district to be dissolved, with students assigned to neighboring districts.

## How will our new and remodeled school buildings be better?

Perhaps the best aspect of the district's realignment plan is that, when it's fully completed, all school children will have equal access to enhanced programs and services, no matter where they live. And each school building will also have numerous upgrades to improve access, safety and much more, including:

- Centralized access to schools, security cameras and other necessary improvements for 21st century security will provide safe learning environments.
- State of the art science equipment, labs and computer stations.
- Full accessibility. Those who are disabled, elderly or otherwise physically challenged will now be able to enjoy all areas of our schools.
- Gyms, fitness centers, media centers and more that can be used at night and on weekends by the community.
- Possible on-site daycare facilities.
- Modern lighting and ventilation provide healthier environments.
- Many of our schools are long overdue for upgrades to flooring, roofs, heating and the like. Implementing this plan will also address those needs.



# Realities of why the district needs to change.

by Dr. Charles Rick, Superintendent of Schools



As the largest district geographically in Minnesota, ISD 2142 faces challenges that are not faced by other school districts in the state. As we discuss reorganization, these challenges become even more apparent.

For years the district has operated K-12 schools in seven communities, representing the ideal of “community schools” as the centerpieces of those communities. But today, as our enrollment continues to drop closer to 2,000 students (compared to 2,800 just 10 years ago), we can no longer afford to support operations in seven different facilities. There’s just too much wasted space, taking away valuable resources that could be dedicated to modern efficiencies and programming for better educating our children.

A recent survey of residents, conducted by Decision Resources Ltd., found that 89 percent of us believe that major changes are needed in our school district, and 81 percent believe it is important to keep this district together.

But the solution isn’t as easy as closing a couple of schools and transferring students to the remaining buildings. Doing so would only increase travel time for some students, putting them in schools that would still be outdated and unable to provide modern curriculum. Or, parents might send their children to schools in neighboring districts, further eroding district enrollment, thus even further eroding our ability to provide the excellent education our young people deserve.

So the school board and district staff, working with Johnson Controls and residents throughout the district, came up with a better idea. It started with some simple questions: If we were going to start over and operate fewer buildings, how would we do that? Where would those buildings be placed to minimize travel issues, maximize community interest and serve our population most effectively?

Once we answered those questions, we explored whether we could follow that path and restructure our district in a way that is cost-effective.

**The plan may not be perfect, but it provides the modern education our young people deserve.**

The proposed plan – closing the AlBrook and Cotton schools and building a new school to serve those areas; closing the Cook and Orr schools and building a new school to serve those areas; and remodeling the Cherry, Babbitt-Embarrass and Tower-Soudan (Pre-K–6) schools – reflects a more efficient constellation of our facilities.

The plan also improves our ability to deliver modern programs. Talk to some of our principals and teachers and hear about their excitement for many improvements that are just ahead.

While the plan will perhaps never be seen as perfect, it gives parents a reason to continue their commitment to ISD 2142. That’s because simply closing several existing schools and transferring students to the remaining ones is a recipe for continued exodus from our district.

Take a look at the other research findings elsewhere in this brochure.

Sixty-two percent of our residents believe the consolidation strategy is the best choice, compared to 14 percent who support closing three to five schools and operating the remaining ones in their current locations. By a 60 percent to 30 percent margin, residents support a bond referendum that would implement this plan.

I believe residents are asking for a smart plan that addresses our needs and keeps the district together, not a plan which just delays the dissolution of the district. The School Board and staff of ISD 2142 feel strongly that the community has created the plan that best meets its desires.



## Results of School Board study session regarding consequences if the December 8 referendum does not pass

The ISD 2142 School Board met September 9 in a study session to consider the various consequences and options for the district if voters do not pass a bond issue on December 8. After in-depth discussions about programming cuts, teacher layoffs, funding options, declining enrollment and school closures, the board concluded the district would need to immediately begin closing schools, with district dissolution shortly following as an inevitable consequence.

The board acknowledged that if the referendum fails, decisions will immediately need to be made about closing three to four schools starting in the summer of 2010 as an interim step. After that, the district would have to begin discussions with nearby school districts to see how students might be absorbed into them.

"The school board has developed an affordable plan for restructuring the district, which would provide students with expanded curriculum in modern learning environments, so hopefully voters will approve the plan and the options discussed at this study session will never have to be implemented," said Superintendent Dr. Charles Rick. "Unfortunately, no matter how you look at these options if a 'no' vote prevails, the board has little choice other than to close schools and make severe program cuts. It is becoming more apparent that our children would then ultimately have to attend school in other districts."

The three-hour long study session began with Business Manager Kim Johnson reporting that despite millions of dollars of spending cuts already, the school district will soon be out of reserve funds. She said if the referendum fails, the district would most likely enter into "statutory operating debt" by fiscal year 2011, which means the State of Minnesota recognizes that the school district can no longer balance its expenditures and revenues.

After agreeing that the district cannot expect to see increasing revenues – due to cuts in state funding, declining enrollment, failure to pass three recent operating levies, and other factors – the school board looked at ways it might drastically reduce expenses if the restructuring plan is not approved by voters.

The board discussed further reducing program offerings, cutting additional teachers, closing several schools, and a combination of these approaches. Business Manager Johnson said with labor accounting for 75 percent of the district's expenses, the surest way to reduce spending would be to close schools.

"Unlike the recommended plan where we are responsibly investing in a restructured district by closing some schools, these other options also close schools but don't solve any of our financial challenges. These other options are not good for young people and our entire region," said Board Chair Robert Larson. "We've already cut programs and teachers several times to make ends meet, and going any further will only cause parents to open enroll their children elsewhere. If we close schools, which ones do we close?"

Part of the study session included a discussion of potential criteria that could be used to determine which schools to close, including building age, enrollment size, geographic location, academic performance and others.

Board Member Darrell Bjerklie, who represents the Cherry attendance area, said, "It won't matter which ones because the others will be closed in short order."

During the study session, consultant John Powers said that during an evaluation this past spring of optional school configurations, principals at the district's seven schools were asked how they would spend additional



dollars for education if a new option saved operating money, and also how they would trim nearly \$600,000 from their budgets in order to keep all seven schools open. Three principals couldn't even begin to suggest how to cut \$600,000 from their budgets, Powers said, and the other four would have to eliminate major education and activity programming.

"Bottom line is if we don't pass this bond referendum we'll be putting our schools in hospice," added Board Member Gary Rantala, who represents the Babbitt-Embarrass attendance area.

The School Board wrapped up the study session by comparing three possibilities for reducing expenses: implementing the plan now being considered by voters, cutting programming or closing schools. Each Board member weighed 10 areas for each of those three options, and assigned a score of 2 if they thought an option would be better than now exists, a score of 1 if an option would provide the same result as the district has today, and a score of zero if the option would be worse than we have today.

Therefore, the maximum score would be 14 if all seven Board members felt an aspect would be better than now exists with the new plan. Below are the results:

	New Plan	Cut Programming	Close Schools
Enrollment	11	0	0
Teachers	13	0	0
Core Programs	13	0	7
Electives	13	0	0
Extra Curricular	12	0	0
Technology	12	0	0
Safety	13	7	0
Facilities	12	0	0
Community Access	8	5	0
Travel Time	6	4	0
Totals	113	16	7

## Another way of viewing our options.

This graphic representation captures the various possibilities and consequences discussed at the School Board's September 9 study session.

