

Referendum Survey & Feedback Sessions Winter 2024

Research, Assessment, & Improvement

March 2024

Key Takeaways

- To inform a potential upcoming referendum, MMSD gathered feedback from the community via an online survey and seven engagement meetings. MMSD received 2027 responses to the online survey, most of which were from individuals who identified themselves as current or former MMSD staff members, and 84 people attended the meetings.
- In the survey, most responses indicated support for a long-term 20 year facilities referendum (62%) and for a facilities referendum focused on middle schools (60%), though a large percentage were undecided (~30% for each question). A vast majority of responses identified the operations referendum as a high (78%) or moderate (12%) priority.
- In the survey, the majority of open-ended comments in response to both questions were from staff demanding a 4.12% cost-of-living increase. Other themes regarding facilities included support for basic infrastructure improvements such as heating/cooling and air conditioning, prioritizing improvements based on building needs, and incorporating learning from prior referendum projects into ongoing plans. Other themes regarding operations included support for retaining staff with competitive salaries and small class sizes and prioritizing support staff in buildings.

Background & Purpose

The MMSD Board of Education is considering two referenda questions for the community to vote on in November 2024: one for facilities improvements and one for operations. To inform these plans and ensure the needs and priorities of community members are met, MMSD solicited community feedback through a survey administered in the February and March of 2024. In addition to the survey, the district hosted seven community engagement sessions between February 20 - March 5, 2024.

This brief report summarizes the results of the survey and engagement sessions to inform district office and BOE planning on these potential referenda, guided by the following questions:

- *Who participated in these opportunities?*
- *What were respondents' ratings of support and priority for the facilities and operations referenda?*
- *What other suggestions or feedback did respondents share via narrative, open-ended comments or discussion notes?*

Data & Methods

Survey

MMSD administered the survey from February 22 - March 18, 2024. We distributed it through two primary methods: community events specific to the referendum as

well as an open call distribution method. We also sent the survey to middle and high school students via email with links to the presentation. The survey was short to encourage participation, including three closed-ended questions and two opportunities to share additional thoughts via open-ended questions. A summary of questions is below, and the full survey text is available in Appendix A.

1. Would you support the Madison Metropolitan School District requesting authority to invest in a long-term 20-year facilities referendum? (*Definitely yes, probably yes, undecided, probably not, definitely not*)
2. Would you support a facilities referendum that prioritizes investments in middle schools as the next phase of the 2020 Future Ready Facilities Referendum? (*Definitely yes, probably yes, undecided, probably not, definitely not*)
3. What additional suggestions and feedback do you have for a possible facilities referendum? (*Open-ended*)
4. In your opinion, what is the level of priority for additional funding for district operations? (*High priority, moderate priority, neutral, low priority, not a priority*)
5. What additional suggestions and feedback do you have for a possible operating fund referendum? (*Open-ended*)

After the survey closed, the Research, Assessment, and Improvement (RAI) team tabulated responses to the survey's three closed-ended or multiple choice questions about support for the facilities and operations referenda; we summarize these results in this memo. We also conducted inductive qualitative coding (e.g., analyst reading responses to identify prevalent themes, then tagging those themes to the data) of two open-ended questions to identify major themes, which we also present in this summary.

Engagement Sessions

In addition to the survey, the district also hosted seven meetings to engage the community between February 20 - March 5, 2024. Six sessions took place in-person at MMSD schools throughout the community, with sessions available in English, Spanish, Hmong and American Sign Language. Two sessions specifically targeted Spanish and Hmong-speaking families. One session took place virtually. At each session, participants heard short presentations about the district's preliminary thoughts around facilities and operating referenda. Then, they engaged in small group conversations about three questions:

1. The first area for our discussion tonight will be TEACHING AND LEARNING. What do you see as immediate or short term needs for the district, its families and students? And what do you see as long-term needs? For example, as was mentioned, MMSD has prioritized literacy, as well as programs like dual language immersion and early childhood education. How does MMSD continue these programs without adequate funding from the state?
2. The next topic for our discussion is the MMSD DISTRICT BUDGET. How should MMSD prioritize their district budget to best serve students and families? For

example, MMSD staff mentioned the ongoing costs of hiring and retaining a highly-qualified and skilled workforce, while also balancing the need to implement academic programs and facility needs. What are your thoughts on a potential 2024 referendum to meet these needs. And what do you think about the idea of the 20 year referendum?

3. Our last area of discussion tonight is FACILITIES. How should MMSD prioritize their facility needs to meet the needs of the district and community - both immediately and long term. Here's an example: Bob Soldner mentioned investing in critical infrastructure such as HVAC and accessibility. He also mentioned sustainability and renewable energy. What are your thoughts on these issues?

The district provided a facilitator and notetaker for each group. The notetaker captured the total number of participants per group, plus qualitative notes on the conversations by question. At the end, facilitators guided participants to also take the online survey.

In total, 84 people participated in the engagement sessions. District notetakers did not capture any demographic information about participants. RAI compiled all notes by question and then conducted similar qualitative coding to the survey to identify major themes, which we present at the end of this report.

Results

Survey

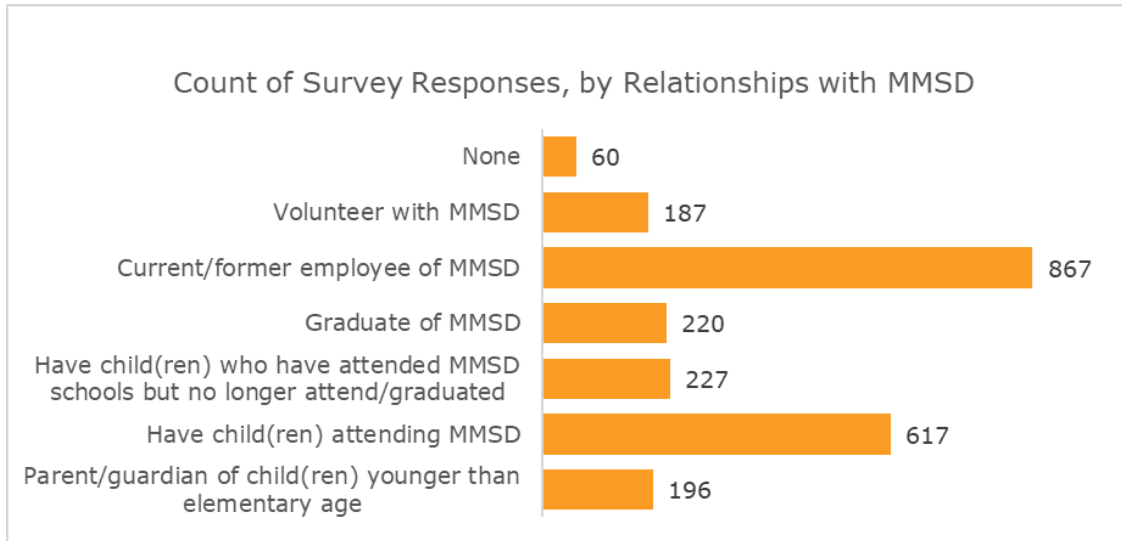
The following sections present results on the survey, including information on the respondents, a summary of responses to 3 survey questions on the proposed facilities and operating referendum, and a summary of themes that emerged from the open-ended questions.

Respondent Information

There were 2027 responses submitted to the survey, about half of which (1014) were submitted on March 6th, 2024. Because of the optional, self-reported nature of the survey questions, information on all respondents' identities is not available. However, most that answered demographic questions fit a particular profile: 83% are white, 84% live in the MMSD attendance area, 77% reside in the City of Madison, 82% own homes, and 94% are registered voters.

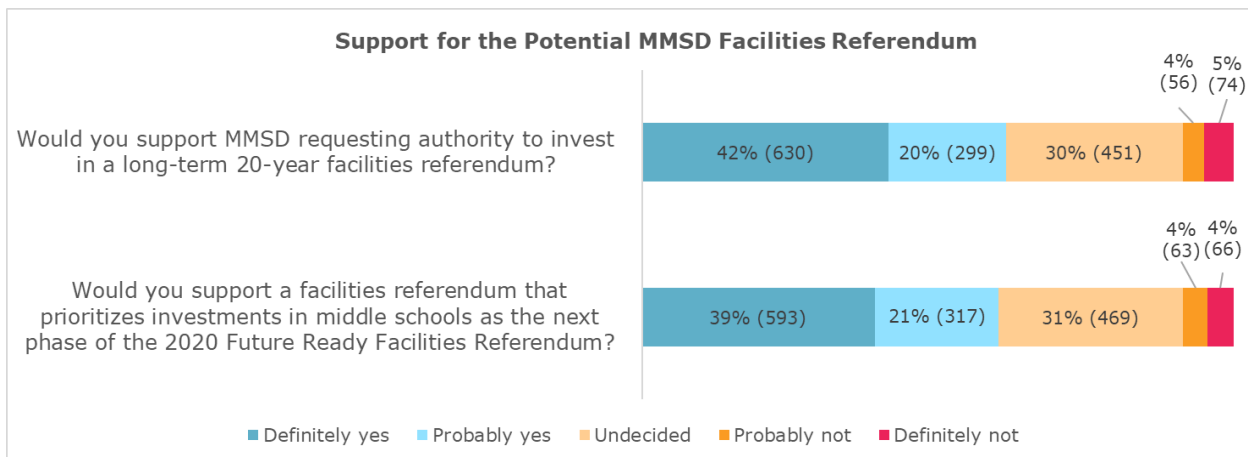
The survey also asked respondents to identify all¹ relationships they have with MMSD, with most respondents identifying as a current/former staff member (867) or family member of a currently enrolled student in MMSD (617). The district also sent the survey to secondary students, although this demographic group was not specifically noted in the data.

¹ Because respondents could select more than one, the sum of relationships will not total the overall number of survey responses.



Support for Facilities Referendum

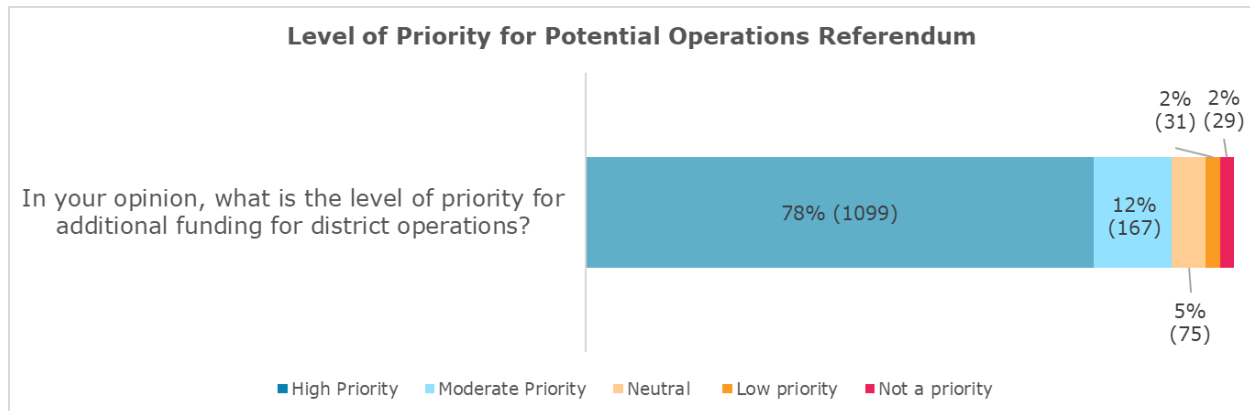
The survey asked respondents to weigh in on two questions regarding a potential facilities referendum: first, whether respondents would support MMSD’s requesting authority to invest in a *long-term 20-year facilities referendum*, and second, whether respondents would support a *facilities referendum prioritizing investments in middle schools* as the next phase of the 2020 Future Ready Facilities Referendum.



These questions yielded similar results from respondents, with 62% (926) of responses indicating definite or probable support for the first question and 60% (906) of responses indicating definite or probable support for the second question. Both questions received a sizable number of “undecided” responses, 30% and 31%, respectively. Under ten percent of responses for each question indicated that they were probably or definitely not planning to support these initiatives.

Support for Operation Referendum

The survey also asked respondents to rate the level of priority they would assign to additional funding for district operations. A vast majority (78%) of responses to this question indicated high support, with an additional 12% providing moderate support. A small number of responses were undecided (5%), low priority (2%), or not a priority (2%).



Open Ended Questions

The survey also provided the opportunity for respondents to give “additional suggestions or feedback” for both the facilities and operations referendum through two open-ended questions.

Facilities Themes

The open-ended facilities question yielded 774 total comments, summarized into themes below:

- The majority of responses did not pertain to the facilities referendum specifically; around 400 comments (~52%) dealt with the demand for a 4.12% COLA increase for staff. Also, there were more generic comments stating the need to invest in staff in addition to, before, or instead of investing in facilities. Comments like this will be discussed in further detail in the section on Operations themes.
- Among comments related to facilities, the most common responses (~90) were for **basic infrastructure updates** to schools, including the importance of air conditioning (including many commenters connecting this need to climbing temperatures with climate change), air filtration, adequate heating, and other related improvements.
- Another common response (~50) was the desire for the referendum plan to **prioritize facilities based on need/equity**, with a large subset of these responses indicating the belief that elementary schools need to be addressed before middle schools.
- A couple dozen responses urged the district to **learn from the 2020 referendum**, including more equitable distribution of funding based on site needs and incorporating staff voice into decisions regarding design and implementation. One respondent shared: *"If a referendum is passed any*

changes need to incorporate more teacher voice. Many of the features in the renovated high school did NOT improve instruction spaces and actually made some existing spaces worse."

- A smaller but still noticeable number of comments pertained to needs related to **accessibility** or ADA compliance, additional **maintenance and custodial support** to care for facilities improvements, and **athletics** needs.

Operations themes

Regarding the operations referendum question, there were 711 total open-ended responses. Of the priority areas outlined in the description of the proposed operations work, most comments responded to the goal of **attracting and retaining teachers**.

- Similar to the facilities question, a staggering number (~400) of comments related to the **4.12% cost-of-living adjustment** (COLA) base increase for MMSD staff. Nearly all of these comments came from individuals who identified as current or former employees of MMSD, and many of these responses seemed to follow a standard template: *"Focus on staff retention with a 4.12% cost of living adjustment."*
- Other comments referenced the importance of **competitive wages** for hiring and retaining high-quality staff, whether or not they tied their comment specifically to the desired COLA increase. One respondent said: *"Don't just talk the talk, you have to walk the walk. If you want quality education to be provided to our future leaders then compensate your educators accordingly."*
- There were also several comments about **smaller class sizes** (implying more teachers).
- Some of these comments implied that funding for staff should **prioritize staff in schools**, rather than those in support positions in the Central Office administration.

While comments about staff pay were by far the most frequent theme, there were a few additional themes that emerged prominently in response to this question.

- Many comments dealt with the need for **additional support staff in schools** to more adequately serve students with IEPs, English Learners, and students with behavioral needs, as well as counselors, psychologists, social workers, and academic interventionists to serve the social-emotional and academic needs of students, respectively. One respondent emphasized the importance of school support staff, saying, *"Staff funding for Special Education and Behavioral support needs so much attention, because when there are disruptions in the classroom that are under supported, everyone's education is disrupted"* while another noted, *"I don't see anything on here about funding for more support staff, such as school psychologists, social workers, etc. We are badly understaffed in those areas and we can't meet the needs of many of our students."*

A smaller number of comments spoke to the other areas of priority highlighted in the question text.

- While **multilingual learning** was mentioned by a number of respondents and generally supported, some comments suggested mixed feelings.

Comments ranged from “invest more in our multilingual programs” to “would like to see DLI more inclusive into the school building” to “it is unclear whether [the DLI program] is meeting its goals.”

- A number of responses addressed the stated **focus on middle schools**, with most agreeing that this grade level requires focus. One respondent said, “The most glaring needs in the district at the moment are in the middle schools, where students have so few options for electives and are stuffed into crowded rooms with not enough teachers.”
- Comments around **strategic equity projects** mostly referred to the need for more information or clarity about what these initiatives entail.

Other themes

Across both questions, there were a few dozen respondents who used their feedback opportunities to provide suggestions for how the district should go about **messaging the referendum** or “selling” it to the community. Some comments highlighted the need for the district to be clear and transparent about the implications for taxes. In addition, comments urged the district to be specific with how additional funds will be used and highlight the extent of need in the district to justify the funds. Some comments suggested MMSD share positive stories of what has been done with the 2020 referendum and make a compelling case for the referenda that centers students-- both current and future. As one respondent suggested: “Clear and repeated communication around how the operating referendum would lead to the four goals listed is important for the community to understand how the increase in revenue is needed in order to sustain a vibrant school district.” In addition, commenters thought that individuals would need more information regarding the 20-year referendum in order to make informed decisions about it.

There were also a few dozen responses stating a **lack of support** for the referendum, many of which cited referendum fatigue (“I thought we just gave you a huge referendum?”) and/or suggested the district find alternative sources of funding to close operating gaps and complete facilities renovations, such as lobbying the state for funding, working with the private and nonprofit sectors for funds, or cutting district costs. Some of these comments also suggested ways the district could cut back within the proposed referendum plan, such as “Eliminate any discussion of sustainability, taxpayers cannot afford it” and “I would support the referendum as long as the money is not wasted on equipment that will require more repairs and maintenance than what we have now.” Many of the respondents residing in Madison flagged a simultaneous referendum sought by the City of Madison, which they feared would create an undue burden on taxpayers residing within MMSD and Madison city limits.

Engagement Sessions

The following sections present results from the thematic coding of notes taken during the engagement sessions. In total, 84 participants joined the seven engagement sessions offered by MMSD.

Teaching & Learning Themes

During this portion of the sessions, MMSD facilitators asked participants about the immediate and long-term needs around teaching and learning for the districts and its students and families. Facilitators gave examples such as literacy, DLI and early childhood education, asking how the district continues these priority programs without adequate funding from the state. Participants spoke to a variety of subject areas and themes, with each conversation ranging quite a bit in its focus and key points. Overall, we saw a consistent theme around staffing similar to the survey, both in the need to attract and retain high-quality staff (*"Making sure teachers are paid pretty well and that we're keeping good staff in the schools"*) as well as the sentiment that the district needs more staff overall and in specific areas such as special education, interventionists, student support and other supporting roles in schools (*"support for staff and help in the classroom"*). Relatedly, they talked about reducing class sizes as one strategy to support teachers, impact staffing and address unmet needs (*"In order to have lower class sizes we need more teachers."*). Participants also spoke to specific academic programs and areas of focus, such as literacy (*"Literacy needs to continue to be a focus; especially for those that were virtual during early learning years"*) and DLI (*"DLI program is important both long term and short term"*) as key priorities for MMSD in the short and long-term. In the notes, very few comments were recorded relating to early childhood education.

District Budget Themes

In this section, MMSD facilitators asked participants about how the district should prioritize their budget to best serve students and families, including how to balance ongoing staffing needs with implementing academic programs and facilities upgrades. In general, participants spoke most often to the need to attract, retain and fully staff MMSD positions as a top priority, similar to comments in the section above (*"How can we use the budget to help retain teachers?"*) and, in some cases, explicitly stated as a priority over academic programming and facilities upgrades (*"There are things we have to fix, but building out new or making something fancier or prettier...we need to focus on staff."*). Some participants cited specific academic needs (such as literacy or DLI) or facilities upgrades (such as air quality, basic maintenance or sustainability; *"More efficient system; hvac, lighting, etc. These things are an investment for the long term"*) as priorities to consider as well.

Facilitators also asked about participants' thoughts on a potential 2024 referendum to meet these needs, and the potential to undertake a 20-year referendum. Participants varied quite a bit in their support and understanding of a 20-year referendum, with comments almost equally split between support ("*20 year option sounds very attractive*"), opposition ("*20 year may be a hard sell*") and asking for more information ("*Need to understand the pace of a 4 year or 20 year*"). Many participants who spoke to this cited their inclination to support any MMSD referendum ask ("*I would vote for whatever is on the ballot- the 4 or 20*"). Participants cited questions about the exact dollar amounts, funding priorities and messaging strategy to the community needed to generate support.

Facilities Themes

In the last small group discussion of each session, MMSD facilitators asked participants about how MMSD should prioritize facility needs to meet the needs of the district and community, both in the immediate and long-term. They mentioned items discussed in the presentation such as HVAC, accessibility, sustainability and renewable energy. In response, participants' conversations varied quite a bit between sessions, although each one touched on some elements described above. Similar to the survey responses, participants spoke to the need for the district to address critical facility issues, particularly HVAC and AC in buildings that do not yet have it ("*HVAC and accessibility is so important*"). Some participants brought up the need to prioritize facilities upgrades to address inequities ("*Target the schools where gaps are biggest*") and/or by addressing buildings with the most critical needs first ("*Schools with the most needs should be served first*"). While those who commented on it were generally supportive of including sustainability in facilities plans, they also mentioned the need to balance that high-dollar ask against the immediate needs and taxpayer impact. Consistent with the two discussions above, participants also spoke to staffing as the critical element to consider, with several stating the sentiment that staffing, not facilities, must be the top priority for MMSD.

Discussion

Through an online survey and seven engagement sessions, MMSD sought to understand community perspectives on proposed facilities and operations referendum questions. MMSD received 2,027 survey responses and notes from 84 session participants, providing a wealth of feedback and ideas to consider as planning continues.

Responses to the survey suggest a moderate level of support for the facilities referendum, with a large proportion of "undecided" respondents for each of the two questions. The operations referendum, meanwhile, gathered much more board support with around 90% indicating it is a high or moderate priority. Open-ended comments and engagement session notes provide richer detail to these overall looks, giving ideas for where support is strongest (e.g., staffing, DLI), where

questions remain (e.g., how to understand the types of referendum options), and potential moves for the future (e.g., how to message the referendum).

The timing of the survey in the midst of conversations about cost-of-living increases for staff likely resulted in a highly motivated sample of responses that disproportionately represents the voice of staff members relative to other types of relationships to MMSD (e.g. community member, family member). The number of responses received on a single day suggests a coordinated effort to flood the survey with similar messages urging the district to implement 4.12% COLA increases for staff. Nonetheless, it is clear that paying staff competitively is an important priority to respondents of this survey, as evidenced by the open-ended responses as well as the high level support for the question on priority for the operations referendum. Furthermore, of staff who responded to the survey, 672 reported they are residents of MMSD attendance area and 661 stated they are registered to vote, so staff responses to this question should be taken seriously. In addition, engagement session notes indicate that participants place a high priority on attracting and retaining staff, including paying them competitively.

It is possible that the skew of the survey towards staff and the timing around the COLA conversations results in data that overrepresented support for the operations referendum relative to the facilities referendum. However, the number of undecided responses for the questions around facilities suggests the district should consider doubling down on efforts to communicate the need for and anticipated impact of passing the facilities referendum.

In addition, as with many efforts to collect community feedback through surveys, this survey collected feedback from a non-representative slice of the MMSD and Madison community. In particular, communities of color are underrepresented in this survey (16%), so additional targeted efforts to gather feedback may be considered. While most students would not be eligible to vote in the 2024 election, it may also be useful to ensure that students as primary users of school facilities have opportunities to add their voices. As the engagement sessions did not capture demographic information on participants, we cannot say if those sessions were more representative than the survey.

Appendix A: Survey Text

Referendum 2024 Survey

Introduction

The Madison Metropolitan Board of Education is considering two referenda questions for the community to vote on in November 2024 - one for facilities improvements and one for operating/programs. These community investments would further our academic vision for the future; create innovative, flexible, and modern instructional spaces; and strengthen our position as an employer of choice that retains and attracts high-quality staff.

We value the voice of our MMSD community! We are committed to getting input on this possible referenda, to ensure we understand the needs and priorities of the community. Information gathered from this survey will be compiled and shared with the MMSD Board of Education as they consider a potential referenda.

Thank you for your input and for sharing what we should consider as we lead with learning in planning for the future.

Facilities Referendum: Updated learning environments that transform instruction and boost school climate

In 2020, voters approved a referendum for comprehensive renovations in our high schools. During that time, the district previewed a recommendation to focus on middle schools as the next phase of renovations and improvements. This approach incorporates facility improvements, sustainability/renewable energy goals, and meeting our students' needs. Transforming our physical spaces in this way would allow students to learn, lead, and create change for the future. Our community has the opportunity to approach these needed improvements from a short- or long-term perspective.

Consider if the Madison Metropolitan School District requests authority to invest in a long-term, 20-year facilities referendum. This approach helps to achieve the Board of Education Renewable Energy 2040 Goals and address critical facilities needs outlined in the 2023 Building Condition Report and 2024 Long Range Facilities Plan, focusing on schools not covered in the 2020 referendum. This long-term investment would allow the district to address infrastructure needs such as mechanical updates for improved energy efficiency, heating/cooling, accessibility as well as enhancing educational spaces for literacy, art, music, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and climate and community spaces.

1. Would you support the Madison Metropolitan School District requesting authority to invest in a long-term 20-year facilities referendum?
 - Definitely yes
 - Probably yes
 - Undecided
 - Probably not
 - Definitely not

2. Would you support a facilities referendum that prioritizes investments in middle schools as the next phase of the 2020 Future Ready Facilities Referendum. This includes incorporating sustainability enhancements toward achieving the Board of Education Renewable Energy Goals while enhancing educational spaces for literacy, art, music, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and climate and community spaces.
 - Definitely yes
 - Probably yes
 - Undecided
 - Probably not
 - Definitely not

 3. What additional suggestions and feedback do you have for a possible facilities referendum?
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Operating Referendum

High-quality educational experiences that support students' learning

To meet our district vision of preparing students to be ready for college, career, and community, students need access to high-quality educational experiences. Some of these include four-year-old Kindergarten (4K), arts, world language, dual language programs, and language immersion opportunities. These services and supports that we currently provide students depend on retaining high-quality staff in a competitive environment. At the same time, while public school districts 2023-24 saw a slight increase in funding this year from the State for the first time in four years, the State largely continues a 12-year pattern of underfunding K-12 education. The state per-pupil aid and funding caps have not kept pace with inflation to maintain the current level of academic offerings, student support services, and small class sizes. MMSD has a budget-conscious way of working, where every year our resources are evaluated for the highest and best use, and are reallocated as appropriate. MMSD is in the final year of a four-year recurring operating referendum that has previously stabilized our budget. A new four-year recurring operating referendum, along with resource reallocation and additional strategies to increase revenue, would allow us to continue to maintain a stable budget.

4. District Operating Funds A referendum for additional funding for district operations would allow MMSD to continue to:
 - Attract and retain quality teachers
 - Expand early learning and multilingual opportunities
 - Expand Middle School programming in arts, music, science/technology, athletics, and more
 - Invest in the district's strategic equity projects (e.g., full day four-year old kindergarten and Community Schools) that are aligned to the district's vision and goals.

In your opinion, what is the level of priority for additional funding for district operations?

- High priority
- Moderate priority
- Neutral
- Low priority
- Not a priority

5. What additional suggestions and feedback do you have for a possible operating fund referendum?

Respondent Information

6. Do you live in the Madison Metropolitan School District attendance area?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

7. In which municipality do you reside?

- City of Madison
- City of Fitchburg
- Town of Madison
- Town of Blooming Grove
- Village of Maple Bluff
- Village of Shorewood Hills
- City of Middleton
- Town of Middleton
- City of Monona
- City of Verona
- Town of Verona
- Other

8. What is your zip code?

9. Do you own or rent your current residence?

- Own
- Rent
- Other

10. Are you registered to vote?

- Yes
- No

11. Please mark ALL relationships you have with the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD):

- Parent/guardian of child(ren) younger than elementary school age
- Have child(ren) attending school in MMSD
- Have child(ren) who have attended MMSD schools but no longer attend/graduated
- Graduate of MMSD
- Current or former employee of MMSD
- Volunteer with MMSD
- None

12. If you have children, please select the school(s) your children will attend, or currently attend, or have attended. (Check all that apply)

- Anana Elementary
- Badger Rock Middle
- Black Hawk Middle
- Capital High
- Chavez Elementary
- Cherokee Middle
- Crestwood Elementary
- East High
- Elvehjem Elementary
- Emerson Elementary
- Franklin Elementary
- Henderson Elementary
- Gillespie Jefferson Middle
- Gompers Elementary
- Hamilton Middle
- Hawthorne Elementary
- Huegel Elementary
- Innovative & Alternative Programs
- Kennedy Elementary
- La Follette High
- Lake View Elementary
- Lapham Elementary
- Leopold Elementary
- Lincoln Elementary
- Lindbergh Elementary
- Lowell Elementary
- Marquette Elementary
- Memorial High
- Mendota Elementary
- Midvale Elementary
- Muir Elementary
- Nuestro Mundo at Allis Elementary
- O'Keeffe Middle
- Olson Elementary
- Orchard Ridge Elementary

- Randall Elementary
- Sandburg Elementary
- Schenk Elementary
- Sennett Middle
- Shabazz High
- Sherman Middle
- Shorewood Elementary
- Southside Elementary
- Spring Harbor Middle
- Stephens Elementary
- Thoreau Elementary
- Toki Middle
- Van Hise Elementary
- West High
- Whitehorse Middle
- Wright Middle

13. What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18 - 24
- 25 - 34
- 35 - 44
- 45 - 54
- 55 - 64
- 65 or over

14. What is your race/ethnicity?

- African American
- American Indian
- Asian
- Hispanic/Latino
- Multiracial
- Pacific Islander
- White