



## **2024 Community Engagement Report**

At Northbrook School District 27, we are educating students to succeed in a changing world. Our district has a long-standing tradition of excellence in education. We are continuously striving to improve.

This collaborative work has made our district one of the highest-achieving districts in the entire State of Illinois. We have achieved this while maintaining a healthy financial position, extending the life expectancy of all facilities and grounds, and spending within our means.

However, if we are going to be able to maintain small class sizes while providing our students and teachers with learning environments that support high achievement, we will need additional funding.

Over the past five years, we've spent \$13.5 million of our fund balance to address facility needs. However, we can no longer keep up due to inflation significantly increasing construction costs and the fact that we get limited support from state and federal sources, with local funding making up 94% of our budget compared to a state average of 64%.

In an effort to determine the priorities of our residents, Northbrook School District 27 renewed its community engagement activities in 2024 and began taking active steps in October to engage the public and solicit feedback on a potential solution to our infrastructure challenges. So far, we have received feedback from 516 members of the community through in-person and virtual presentations, an online survey, and a scientific phone survey on what improvements they would like to see to their schools and how they would like to fund those improvements.

Using information provided by the district and the district's experts, we developed a "menu" of potential individual projects, potential funding mechanisms, and potential funding levels. The district has been closely listening to the community as individuals considered and ranked each item on the menu to share their priorities.

During this community engagement, we developed messaging, recruited a community-based committee to lead these efforts, coordinated a discussion with the community committee, conducted a scientific phone survey, and held 3 public engagement sessions (one virtually) at different times and days of the week to ensure all community members could participate. We received tremendous levels of engagement and feedback, gathering 198 responses from engagement sessions and online feedback as well as 318 phone survey responses.

Feedback from the community was documented during this time through notes taken of all direct communications, feedback provided on paper and digital forms at the Community Committee meeting and public engagement sessions, responses to a publicly available feedback form available on the district's website, and spreadsheets generated from the results of the scientific phone survey.

## **Messaging**

We developed messaging to properly communicate how we got to this point, what our successes and challenges have been, and how to approach the path forward. This messaging detailed recent progression and improvements as well as the district's space and infrastructure challenges and limited opportunities as a result. The eight key takeaways from the messaging are below, and a full copy of the messaging is provided with this report.

- At Northbrook School District 27, we are educating students to succeed in a changing world.
- Our district has a long-standing tradition of excellence in education.
- We are continuously striving to improve.
- This collaborative work has made our district one of the highest-achieving districts in the entire State of Illinois.
- We have achieved this while maintaining a healthy financial position, extending the life expectancy of all facilities and grounds, and spending within our means.
- However, if we are going to be able to maintain small class sizes while providing our students and teachers with learning environments that support high achievement, we will need additional funding.
- Addressing these challenges will ensure our schools meet our community's high expectations.
- That's why our community has come together to develop a long-term plan that sustainably addresses our facility needs.

## **Community Committee**

We developed a committee of individuals to provide direct, informed input to the district. The committee is made up of a cross-section of District 27 stakeholders, including parents, teachers, taxpayers without children in the district, business owners, seniors, and local government officials. The committee has been formalized and tasked with the responsibility of actively gathering feedback from the community to determine what they would like to see for the future of District 27. The first Community Committee meeting took place December 2.

## **Public Engagement**

The district held 2 in-person public engagement sessions and 1 virtual session at different times and days of the week to provide all members of the community an opportunity to attend. These events were promoted through direct mail, emails, and social media. These sessions presented the latest information about our schools, discussed the successes and challenges ahead, and actively solicited input from the community on potential individual projects, funding mechanisms, and funding levels.

Public engagement sessions were held:

- Tuesday, Dec. 3 at 6:30 pm at Hickory Point School.
- Saturday, Dec. 7 at 10 am at Wood Oaks Junior High School.
- Monday, Dec. 9 at 6:30 pm virtually through Zoom webinar.

Verbal discussions occurred during these meetings and additional collaboration opportunities were made available as well through feedback forms and the district's website.

## **Feedback Report**

Attached is a detailed report of the feedback that was collected during this phase of the process, which includes feedback from the Community Committee, the public at public engagement sessions, and the public via the online feedback form on the district website.

### **Scientific Phone Survey**

The district conducted a public phone survey called a “menu survey” to gauge support for each potential individual project, funding mechanism, and funding level. For each item discussed, respondents were given information on each item as well as estimated costs. The survey was taken before the full public had been educated on the projects or fully informed of the district’s needs. This was done in order to obtain an accurate representation of the public’s unbiased, intuitive reactions to everything tested in the menu.

The results from the menu survey are provided with this report.

### **Engagement Analysis**

In forming our analysis, we reviewed all data points provided by members of the community. First, through the menu survey, which gives us a scientifically accurate snapshot of the intuitive reactions of members of the community to the items being discussed. Second, through the public engagement sessions and online engagement, which give us the more passionate responses from community members very invested in their schools who have taken some time to consider these issues. Third, through the Community Committee, whose responses come after significant discussion, allowing us to track the movement of opinions as individuals become more engaged and educated on these topics.

An important data point for processes like this is the favorability of the school district because the success of any future effort is tied to how residents feel about the district. Here, the phone survey provides good news: 91% rate their school district favorably while only 2% rate the district unfavorably for a net favorability rating of +89%. This is among the highest ratings we have seen in testing over the past 7 years. Clearly, District 27 residents support their schools and are appreciative of the work being done by the district.

### **Potential Individual Projects**

All individual projects tested are supported overall by the public, including many with strong support. In fact, the average net support for the projects is +42%. This is a very positive sign.

The community’s top two priorities are Safety & Security and Infrastructure & Mechanicals. Safety & Security is top priority for the general public and has the highest favorability (+69%). Infrastructure & Mechanicals is top priority for the Community Committee, staff, and those who provided feedback online or at public engagement sessions (referred to simply as “public engagement participants” through the rest of this analysis).

Next in priority is Technology. This project ranks second among the general public and third with the Community Committee, as well as ranking as high as second among key demographics like parents, young families, and seniors.

The next three projects are all strongly supported, they are simply slightly lower in priority for the community: Additional Classrooms; Classroom Furniture, Carpeting, & LED Lighting; and Multi-Use Spaces. Each project has favorability over +40%, and each has strong support among a specific group: Additional Classrooms ranks fourth among the general public; Classroom Furniture, Carpeting, & LED Lighting ranks as high as second among staff and fourth with the Community Committee and public engagement participants; and Multi-Use Spaces ranks third with public engagement participants and fourth with staff.

The remaining projects have solid support, even though they are the lowest ranked: Auditorium, Music Rooms, & Fitness Room; Parking & Student Drop Off; Playgrounds; and Storage Space. Parking & Student Drop Off specifically has strong support from some groups, rising as high as third among staff for instance, but it's just ninth in priority among the general public and has the lowest favorability of the projects tested (+4%). This indicates there is a small but vocal subset of the community that really wants this improvement but it's not a high priority for the full community.

### **Potential Funding Mechanisms**

The community indicates a clear favorite when it comes to funding mechanisms.

The Debt Service Extension Base (DSEB) funding mechanism is the clear top choice. Every group ranks it as their preferred mechanism: the general public, Community Committee, public engagement participants, and staff. It also has very high favorability (+46%).

Meanwhile, the Traditional Bonds funding mechanism is ranked second by every group. It even ranks third behind "Unsure or No Opinion" for the general public and has net opposition (-12%).

It's important to note that while DSEB is the public's top choice, there are some signs of weakness that indicate work will need to be done to fully explain this mechanism. 33% are unsure which method is best when asked to pick, 21% are unsure about DSEB, and DSEB's support is more somewhat (44%) than strong (19%).

### **Potential Funding Levels**

The public shows support for providing additional funding to improve D27 schools, with 83% supporting one of the funding levels provided and only 9% favoring no additional funding for the district. This is another strong sign of positivity around this process.

That said, the data shows that the overall funding range tested during this phase is slightly above the range in which the community is comfortable. The High Funding Level receives slight opposition (-8%) and ranks third among the general public and public engagement participants. Notably, this funding level is the second choice among the Community Committee and Staff, two groups that typically choose the highest funding level as their top choice.

The top choice is clearly the Medium Funding Level. This level ranks first with the general public, Community Committee, staff, and public engagement participants while showing strong favorability (+21%).

The Low Funding Level has extremely high favorability (+51%) and is the second choice for the general public and public engagement participants, but it is the last choice for the Community Committee and staff.

### **Developing the Final Plan**

Overall, the feedback during this engagement process is very positive. The community strongly supports the district, recognizes the need to make investments into improving schools, and is willing to invest in those improvements.

The final plan must address Safety & Security, Infrastructure & Mechanicals, and Technology as much as possible. If there is still space in the available funding, the next highest priorities are Additional Classrooms; Classroom Furniture, Carpeting, & LED Lighting; and Multi-Use Spaces.

The community is most comfortable with a plan that costs around that Medium Funding Level amount: \$43.5 million with a tax impact of \$433/yr. Because of the strong support for the projects being discussed, the district's high favorability, and the fact that a portion of these bonds are able to be issued as Life Safety Bonds, should the district need to increase the amount of the final plan to address the community's top priorities, it is possible to increase these numbers slightly and still have high odds of success. That said, the total funding amount needs to be below \$50 million with a tax impact well below \$500/yr.

While the community does not yet fully understand the difference between DSEB and traditional bonds, their initial impression strongly favors DSEB. We recommend moving forward with this funding mechanism while noting the need to explain why that funding mechanism is best for both the district and taxpayers as we move forward.

Finally, should the district desire, the data indicates it is possible to move forward immediately with a question on the April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025 Consolidated Election ballot. If the district wishes to move forward with an amount higher than what is suggested in this analysis (closer to the High Funding Level), this may be possible, but it would require taking 2025 to educate the public as to why this is the best path forward for the district, after which the district could potentially go to referendum in March or November of 2026.