FORWARD
Advisory Committee

GRAND RAPIDS AREA SCHOOLS
Resilience + Readiness + Excellence

Summary: FORWARD Advisory Committee Meeting 1 – December 4

Grand Rapids Area Schools (GRAS) officials presented information to committee members who had several opportunities to provide feedback. A summary of the presentation and feedback is below.

District Information and Community Survey Results

Trust & Transparency: Participants emphasized the importance of strengthening trust through clearer communication and transparency around decisions.

Information & Perception: Most people get information from friends and family, not media, contributing to gaps between data and public perception.

Student Needs & Equity: New awareness of high needs—nearly half of families qualifying for free/reduced lunch, about 23% of students on IEPs, and concerns about equitable access, including for American Indian students.

District Scale & Complexity: Many were surprised by the size of the district, 9 sites, staffing structure, flat enrollment over decades, and the complexity of serving a large geographic area.

What Comes Next: Strong interest in who responded to the survey, clearer explanations of how funding can and cannot be used, broader community engagement, and how this information will be used to rebuild trust.

Student Achievement Data and Student Opportunities

Assessment & Measurement: Strong concern that MCA results alone are an imperfect "ruler"—with calls for better local benchmarks, growth measures, and clearer understanding of opt-outs, accommodations, and what scores do (and don't) represent.

Results & Reality: Low proficiency rates (around 50% overall; ~47% in math) were sobering, yet many were encouraged that GRAS performs above the state average and has strong graduation rates.

Equity & Context: Participants emphasized poverty, special education, opt-out impacts, and attendance as critical factors, with concern that standardized testing does not fully reflect student learning or equity across communities.

System Constraints: Ongoing challenges include funding limits, class size, staffing, chronic absenteeism, and demands on teachers, all while working within state and federal requirements.

Feedback Questions #1

What facts and information did you hear tonight that were new to you?

The community meeting revealed surprising facts about the district's large geographic size (comparable to Delaware), stable enrollment since the 1950s, and that nearly half of families qualify for free/reduced lunch. Attendees were struck by the high special education percentage (23% on IEPs) and online learning options serving 70 students. A key theme was the contradiction between positive survey results about district quality and a notable lack of trust in school board leadership.

How do you feel about the facts and information presented?

The community expressed significant concern about the lack of trust in leadership, despite survey results showing 70%+ satisfaction with most district metrics, creating a puzzling contradiction that warrants follow-up investigation. Attendees questioned how to improve transparency around budget and funding distribution, reach non-parent community members, and address the spread of misinformation when few residents use local media sources like KAXE and ICTV. Participants voiced worries about supporting vulnerable populations (especially the 23% in special education) amid potential federal funding changes, serving the large geographic area, and expressed being overwhelmed yet hopeful about establishing a baseline for rebuilding trust through increased communication and transparency efforts.

Does anyone have follow-up comments to what your tablemates have offered?

Participants questioned what specifically caused distrust and whether survey responses would differ if "board" and "administration" were separated. Key needs identified include better financial education about restricted funding uses (grants for buildings/parking lots can't be redirected to students/staff), demographic breakdowns of survey respondents, and expanded community engagement beyond current parents. The group emphasized addressing equity gaps for Native students, clarifying staff roles, and helping all residents understand their stake in education.

Feedback Questions #2

What facts and information did you hear tonight that were new to you?

Attendees learned that both local and state MCA proficiency rates hover around 50% (with only 47% proficient in math locally), yet GRAS surprisingly performs above state average and maintains high graduation rates (213/229 seniors expected to graduate in 2026). Participants expressed concern about testing limitations, including that opt-out students automatically count as not proficient, lack of accommodations during testing, and that science is newly added to MCA requirements. A key discussion point was the need to develop alternative measurement tools rather than simply criticizing existing ones, with recognition that data requires nuanced interpretation and MCA scores may not accurately reflect actual student skill levels.

How do you feel about the facts and information presented?

Participants expressed mixed emotions—encouraged that district scores exceed state averages and impressed by high graduation rates (especially in the Anishinaabe Ed program), yet disappointed by overall low proficiency levels. Many questioned whether standardized tests accurately measure student learning, noting "on screen it seems dismal; doesn't feel that way in the buildings," and called for alternative benchmarks and equity data broken down by location, poverty, and American Indian students. The group recognized widespread community misconceptions about testing and conflicted feelings about how to interpret and improve results.

What issues/challenges facing GRAS stood out to you?

Key challenges include poverty, language barriers, and inequitable resource distribution across the district, alongside funding constraints affecting class sizes. Participants questioned how to motivate students to take tests seriously, communicate academic progress beyond flawed metrics, and whether special education students should take identical assessments. Major concerns centered on explaining district versus state testing differences to families and whether test scores fairly represent actual student achievement and progress toward equitable education.

What actions or decisions do you see school leaders facing in the coming years?

School leaders face critical budget decisions including funding for Special Education and Title programs while managing staff reductions and high class sizes. Key challenges include maintaining equity across the district, addressing chronic absenteeism and classroom discipline, and balancing technology/AI integration. Leaders must identify better proficiency metrics beyond standardized tests, improve family/community engagement, effectively communicate data meaning, and celebrate successes while meeting state/federal expectations across the geographically large district with limited resources.

Does anyone have follow-up comments to what your tablemates have offered?

Participants requested more school-specific pre-COVID data and growth models, plus increased funding transparency and clearer communication that MCA opt-outs receive 0% scores. Concerns included lower American Indian testing rates, MCA preparation taking valuable instructional time, and the need for innovative education models. The group appreciated the superintendent's transparency and emphasized addressing chronic absenteeism and mental health as critical priorities.

Responses To “Exit Tickets” (post-it notes)

What is the most important priority for GRAS?

Community members identified three overarching priorities: building trust through transparency and better communication about decisions, test scores, and student progress; achieving truly equitable education across all schools in the geographically large district with adequate funding, manageable class sizes, and classroom support for teachers; and fostering student success by celebrating achievements, ensuring students feel safe and welcomed, addressing mental health crises, building resilient kids, and recognizing that students and teachers are more than test scores. Additional themes included increasing math/science proficiency, providing equitable access to activities like sports, innovating education models beyond the 1900s framework, applying practical life skills earlier, and mobilizing community involvement since "318 staff cannot do this alone."