FORWARD

Advisory Committee

GRAND RAPIDS AREA SCHOOLS
Resilience + Readiness + Excellence

Group Response to Budget Exercise: Meeting #3 (March 28, 2026)

After completing the budget-building simulation, committee groups identified their top three investment priorities and explained their reasoning. While each group approached the exercise differently, several consistent themes emerged across tables.

1. Class Size and Staffing (Most Frequent Priority)

Reducing class sizes and maintaining adequate staffing levels was the most commonly identified priority across groups.

Participants emphasized:

- Teachers can have a greater impact with fewer students
- Smaller classes support both **student learning and staff effectiveness**
- Staffing investments strengthen multiple areas at once
- Class size decisions reflect a **"students before structures" philosophy**

This theme appeared in multiple groups and was often connected directly to instructional quality and retention.

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2. Student Support Services (Especially Mental Health)

Many groups prioritized additional counselors, psychologists, social workers, and partnerships supporting student mental health.

Participants noted:

- Student needs have increased in recent years
- Rural communities cannot rely on outside systems to fill gaps
- Supporting mental health allows teachers to focus on instruction
- Student support services should remain a **core district responsibility**

Several groups explicitly described these services as essential rather than optional.

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3. Maintaining Financial Stability and Covering Operating Costs

Several groups emphasized the importance of protecting the district's long-term financial sustainability.

Participants highlighted:

- The need to cover inflation and mandated costs
- The importance of maintaining contingency reserves
- Planning for unexpected expenses
- Avoiding short-term decisions that create long-term risk

These responses suggest committee members were attentive not only to programming, but also to fiscal responsibility.

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4. Instructional Quality and Teacher Retention

Some groups identified instructional coaching, professional learning, and retaining experienced staff as key priorities.

Participants connected these investments to:

- Maintaining academic excellence
- Supporting innovation
- Preserving program quality over time
- Ensuring stability for students

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5. Early Childhood and Preschool Expansion

Early learning investments were identified as a strategic priority by some groups.

Participants noted:

- Preschool builds the foundation for later success
- Early intervention improves long-term outcomes
- Expansion supports both students and families

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6. Expanded Student Opportunities (Career Pathways, Arts, and Secondary Programming)

Several groups emphasized the importance of maintaining or expanding middle and high school programming.

Participants highlighted:

- Career and technical education pathways
- Arts programming
- Activities and enrichment opportunities
- Preparing well-rounded graduates

These investments were frequently framed as preparing students for the future.

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7. Facilities and Infrastructure

One group prioritized facilities investments, noting that maintaining buildings now can prevent larger costs later.

This reflects awareness of deferred maintenance risks and long-term stewardship responsibilities.

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8. Long-Range Vision Ideas (Example: New High School Concept)

One group raised the idea of a future high school campus integrated with surrounding communities, signaling interest in long-range structural planning alongside program investments.

Overall Takeaway

Across groups, committee members consistently prioritized **direct investments in students and classrooms**, while also recognizing the importance of **financial stability and responsible long-term planning**.

The strongest shared themes were:

1. Class size and staffing
2. Student support services (especially mental health)
3. Maintaining financial sustainability
4. Instructional quality

Together, these responses suggest the committee's budget instincts centered on **supporting students, supporting staff, and maintaining district stability at the same time.**