



FORWARD

Advisory Committee



GRAND RAPIDS
AREA SCHOOLS
 Resilience + Readiness + Excellence

Executive Summary: Meeting #3 (March 28, 2026)

PURPOSE	The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee is charged with examining district conditions, gathering community perspectives on education priorities, and developing recommendations for cost-effective, long-term delivery of public education.
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1. Meeting Overview

Meeting #3 (the third of four sessions) featured three agenda items: a review of prior survey data, a hands-on budget exercise, and a priorities consensus workshop. Below is a look back at the full process:

Meeting	Focus	Key Activities
Meeting 1	District Background & Data	Survey data, academic outcomes, community priorities homework
Meeting 2	School Finance in MN & GRAS	Finance overview, trust-building homework
Meeting 3	Budget Exercise & Priorities	Staff input, budget simulation, consensus workshop — <u>YOU ARE HERE!</u>
Meeting 4	Resolve, Reflect, Recommend	Consensus workshop — prepare board recommendation (NEXT MEETING: April 23, 6:00 PM)

2. Staff Meeting Feedback (March 23, 2026)

Prior to Meeting #3, GRAS staff participated in a parallel session to gather their perspectives on district priorities. Staff identified the following shared themes when asked “What should be our district’s priority?”

Staff-Identified Priorities:

- Provide high-quality, equitable education for all students
- Recruit and retain strong staff
- Support student well-being and safe environments
- Maintain financial stability and strong community relationships
- Improve class sizes and learning conditions
- Expand opportunities for future readiness

Staff Priority Rankings

When asked to rank priorities drawn from the Community Advisory Committee summary, staff results were:

Rank	Priority	Notes
1	High-Quality, Equitable Education	Average rank 2.0; received the most top-choice votes
2	Strong Staffing	Recruit, retain, and support quality staff
3 (tie)	Student Well-Being & Safe Environments	Foundational, not secondary to academic goals

3 (tied)	Financial Stability & Community Relationships	Supports classrooms; enables long-term mission
4	Class Size & Learning Conditions	Directly impacts instruction and staff effectiveness
5	Expanded Electives & Career Pathways	Important, but after core conditions are strong

KEY SIGNAL	Instruction + staffing formed the clearest and most consistent signal from staff. Staff framed financial stability as a means to classroom quality, not an end in itself.
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3. Homework Survey: Transparency & Trust

Between Meetings 2 and 3, committee members responded to two questions about building trust with the community. A summary of their responses follows.

How can the district increase transparency and trust?

- Maintain honest, clear communication about finances and educational decisions
- Provide regular updates on district goals and performance metrics
- Strengthen parent-teacher relationships through more frequent conferences and community events
- Utilize diverse communication platforms (newsletters, social media) and create structured engagement opportunities through advisory committees and forums

How could FORWARD meetings increase transparency and trust?

- Videotape meetings and offer written summaries for broader accessibility
- Clearly explain how community input influences district decisions
- Increase parent engagement and direct communication
- Offer detailed district comparisons with peer districts and encourage deeper, more diverse discussions

4. Budget Exercise

Participants completed a hands-on budget simulation using a fictional school district (XYZ) designed to mirror the real pressures GRAS faces annually.

Scenario Parameters (NOTE: Mid-exercise we became aware of some challenges with the scenario budget. We adjusted on the fly and completed the exercise.)

- Total budget: \$35,000,000
- Pre-committed (locked): \$22,750,000 (65%) — salaries, benefits, special education, transportation, utilities, debt service
- Discretionary: \$12,250,000 (35%) — participant decisions
- Constraint: No deficit spending permitted

Real District Financial Context (GRAS)

	FY24 Actual	FY25 Actual	FY26 Est.	FY27 Draft
Revenues	\$67.1M	\$66.5M	\$66.7M	\$69.0M
Expenditures	\$60.5M	\$64.4M	\$67.5M	\$71.3M
Net	+\$6.6M	+\$2.1M	-\$871K*	-\$2.3M*

* FY27 draft net improves to +\$1.1M positive operating margin (1.55% of expenditures) when the \$3.4M OPEB levy revenue is included.

Budget Exercise Key Takeaways

- A portion of the budget is untouchable — locked in before any discretionary decisions are made
- Every “yes” requires multiple “no’s” — funding is finite
- Circumstances change constantly — budgets are not static documents
- All needs are legitimate — competing demands reflect real priorities, not misunderstanding
- Reserves matter — groups with stronger reserves adapted better to mid-exercise “reality check” shocks
- Rural district costs are real — geography, climate, and scale add unavoidable costs
- Stakeholder pressure is intense — every constituency has legitimate and urgent demands

5. Budget Exercise: Top Investment Priorities

After completing the simulation, each table reported out their top three investment priorities. The following themes emerged most consistently across all groups.

#	Investment Priority	Participant Reasoning
1	Class Size & Staffing	Most frequent priority across groups. Teachers have greater impact with fewer students; staffing investments strengthen multiple areas simultaneously.
2	Student Support Services (Mental Health)	Counselors, psychologists, and social workers described as essential, not optional. Rural communities cannot rely on external systems to fill gaps.
3	Financial Stability & Operating Costs	Protecting long-term sustainability, maintaining contingency reserves, and avoiding short-term decisions that create long-term risk.
4	Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention	Coaching, professional learning, and retaining experienced staff tied to academic excellence and program stability.
5	Early Childhood Expansion	Preschool as a foundation for long-term student success; early intervention improves outcomes across all grades.
6	Expanded Student Opportunities	Career & technical education, arts, enrichment — framed as preparing well-rounded, future-ready graduates.
7	Facilities & Infrastructure	Maintaining buildings now prevents larger costs later; reflects long-term stewardship responsibility.

OVERALL TAKEAWAY	Across all groups, the committee consistently prioritized direct investments in students and classrooms while recognizing the importance of financial stability and responsible long-term planning. The strongest shared themes: (1) class size and staffing, (2) student support services, (3) financial sustainability, and (4) instructional quality.
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6. Next Steps

Item	Details
Meeting #4: April 23 at 6:00 PM	At FORWARD Meeting #4, we will Resolve, Reflect, Recommend. The committee will work toward consensus and prepare a formal recommendation of Focus Areas for future study for the Board.
Community ThoughtExchange	A community-wide survey link will be distributed between sessions. Committee members are encouraged to participate and to encourage stakeholders and community members their networks to respond.