FORWARD Advisory Committee

GRAND RAPIDS AREA SCHOOLS
Resilience + Readiness + Excellence

Executive Summary: Meeting #4 (April 23, 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.**

1. Meeting Overview

Meeting #4 (the fourth and final session) marked the conclusion of a year-long community engagement process. The committee completed a Priority Reflection activity, reviewed April survey results, and prepared its formal recommendation for the Grand Rapids Area Schools Board of Education. 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
Meeting 4	**Resolve, Reflect, Recommend**	**Final community survey results, priority reflection activity, school board presentation preparation - YOU ARE HERE!**

2. April Community Survey Results (April 17-22, 2026)

Leading into this final meeting, a community survey was open April 17–22, 2026, and drew 724 participants. Respondents included: Parents and families - 65%; Staff - 38%; Community members - 14%; and Students - 2%. When asked to identify their top priority for the district, respondents said:

Rank	Priority	% of Respondents
#1	Class Size and Staffing	44%
#2	Instructional Quality and Teacher Retention	22%
#3	Financial Stability and Operating Costs	15%
#4	Student Support Services (especially Mental Health)	7%
#5	Expanded Student Opportunities (Career Pathways, Arts, Programs)	7%

KEY SIGNALS: These results were consistent across every method used throughout the FORWARD process — budgeting exercises, consensus workshops, and surveys. Together, they point to a unified message:
Focus on the people, programs, and fiscal foundation that support every student, every day.

3. Final Priority Recommendations

Based on all data gathered across four meetings, the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee identified five focus areas to recommend to the Board of Education for further discussion and action:

#	Priority Area	Why It Matters
1	Class Size & Staffing	Most frequent priority across all engagement methods. Smaller classes allow teachers to have greater impact; staffing investments strengthen multiple areas simultaneously.
2	Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention	Coaching, professional learning, and retaining experienced staff are tied directly to academic excellence and program stability.
3	Student Support Services (Mental Health)	Counselors, psychologists, and social workers are essential, not optional. Rural communities cannot rely on external systems to fill gaps. Communications and marketing of current mental health supports will increase access and use.
4	Financial Stability & Operating Costs	Protecting long-term sustainability, maintaining contingency reserves, and avoiding short-term decisions that create long-term risk.
5	Expanded Student Opportunities	Expand Career Pathways, Arts, and Secondary Programs for students.

4. Priority Reflection Activity

During the meeting's Priority Reflection activity, committee members shared perspectives that will help shape the upcoming school board presentation. Key themes included:

Theme	What Committee Members Said
Students First	Students must be at the center of every decision.
Teacher Support	Teachers are stretched thin and need more support.
Mental Health Access	Students and families need to know what mental health services are available and how to access them.
Equity	Students in Bigfork need equitable access to the same opportunities available in Grand Rapids.
Financial Transparency	Financial stability is the foundation for everything else - the community wants transparency and a clear plan for the future.
Trust & Communication	Trust is built through honest communication, follow-through, and engagement. This has been a great start - keep it going.
Continued Engagement	Our community wants to help! Continue offering options for lobbying, collaborating, and staying involved.

5. Overall Takeaway

Across all four meetings and every engagement method, the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee consistently prioritized direct investments in students and classrooms, while recognizing the importance of financial stability and responsible long-term planning.

OVERALL TAKEAWAY	The community's strongest and most consistent shared themes: (1) class size and staffing, (2) instructional quality and teacher retention, (3) student support services and mental health, and (4) financial stability and operating costs. These five areas will form the basis of the committee's formal recommendation to the Board.

6. Next Steps

District leaders believe more student input into the desired daily education experience for students is needed to provide a complete perspective to the school board. In May, school staff will visit both high schools to engage in focused conversation about the changes and improvements to the school that would improve their experience.

The FORWARD Committee will formally present its findings and recommendations to the Grand Rapids Area Schools Board of Education:

Item	Details
School Board Presentation	Representatives of the FORWARD Advisory Committee will present the group's process, findings, and recommendations to the Grand Rapids Area Schools Board of Education.
Date & Time	June 8, 2026 at 6:30 p.m.
Location	ISD 318 Educational Services Center, Boardroom, 650 SW 7th Ave, Grand Rapids
How to Attend	In-person or via LIVESTREAM. All committee members are invited and encouraged to attend to support the team and the work.

Thank You

Thank you to everyone who participated in this process - through surveys, community sessions, staff meetings, and committee work. Your voice has shaped something meaningful.

FORWARD means forward.

The school board will review the results of the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee, including the priority recommendations, and use the information to help them determine how to proceed to best serve students, parents, families, staff, and the entire school district community.

Next steps and opportunities for additional engagement will be communicated with all stakeholders following the June school board meeting.