

Grand Rapids Area Schools

# FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

School leaders spent a full year talking with the community to understand what people cared about and to rebuild trust. The FORWARD process was built to be real, not just for show. Community input shaping the future of our schools.

## Who was involved? Hundreds of People.

- A true cross-section of the community - in role, perspective, and geography
  - Two community surveys
- FORWARD Advisory Committee (4 Mtgs.)
- Staff & Student Feedback Meetings




## The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee met four times, December, 2025 - April, 2026.

A separate Staff feedback session was held in March 2026. And two Student Feedback session were held May, 2026.

The process made a special effort to include voices from Bigfork and Cohasset. These residents raised concerns about students not having the same access to courses and resources as Grand Rapids students.

- ***December**, committee members learned about the district — its size, its budget, and its students.*
- ***January**, they dug into school finance and learned that while revenue grew over the past decade, spending had started to outpace it, leading to nearly $9.8 million in cuts and the loss of about 85 staff positions.*
- ***March**, a hands-on budget exercise helped members understand firsthand why the district's financial decisions are so difficult.*
- ***April**, the committee wrapped up by identifying their top priorities and preparing to share findings with the School Board.*

# FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

The most important finding was how much people agreed — across surveys, meetings, and staff and student feedback sessions — on the same priorities.

## What the Community Said... Focus Areas (Priorities) for Future Consideration:

1. Class Size and Staffing
2. Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention
3. Student Support Services, Especially Mental Health
4. Financial Stability & Operating Costs
5. Expanded Student Opportunities



## How do we move FORWARD?

While some of the identified items may be able to be added with a reallocation of current resources, many will require additional funding. When and how to do so will require extensive discussion by the school board and possibly additional data.

## What Stakeholders Want the School Board to Know

The same ideas came up throughout the FORWARD process:

- Students need to come first in every decision.
- Teachers are working many unpaid hours each week and are burning out.
- Mental health support is only reaching students in crisis — many others are struggling quietly.
- Students in Bigfork and Cohasset don't have the same opportunities as students in Grand Rapids, and that isn't fair.
- The community wants honest communication, even when the news is hard.

## *The community is ready to move forward together!*

*The message is clear: smaller class sizes, quality instruction and supported teachers, real mental health services for students, financial stability, and expanded (and equitable) student opportunities — all with continued community involvement, transparency, and communication.*

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FORWARD Advisory Committee

2026-27 FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

# Final Report To The Grand Rapids Area Schools Board Of Education

June 8, 2026



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# Executive Summary

## FORWARD Community Advisory Committee: Executive Summary of the Full Process

*Overview*

Grand Rapids Area Schools (GRAS) launched the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process in Fall 2025 following a failed 2023 referendum and ongoing financial and programmatic pressures. Rather than immediately returning to a referendum, district leadership chose to pause, listen, and engage intentionally. They committed to a full year of structured community dialogue to understand priorities, build trust, and clarify the path forward.

The FORWARD process was designed from the start to be authentic and participatory, not performative. Community engagement meant meaningful dialogue, input that genuinely shapes decisions, and authentic listening — not simply informing stakeholders of decisions already made.

Committee members were asked to bring their authentic selves to each meeting and function within the following norms: Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be Safe, Be Kind. At the same time, committee members were asked to "Be Brave" as this was a new process and would produce the best results for the future of GRAS with everyone's full participation.

*Who Was Engaged*

The FORWARD process reached a broad and diverse cross-section of the community — in role, perspective, and geography.

Fall 2025 Community Survey: 833 residents responded, with 465 completing all questions and adding their own comments. Respondents included long-term residents (31% had lived in the district more than 30 years), families with school-age children (66%), and community members without direct connections to the schools. The survey ran for two weeks and was distributed across multiple channels — newspapers, Facebook, school and district newsletters — to maximize reach.

April 2026 ThoughtExchange Survey: 724 participants responded between April 17–22, 2026, with an 89% completion rate. Participants included parents and families (65%), staff (38%), community members (14%), and students (2%). The strong completion rate reflects genuine investment in the process.

FORWARD Community Advisory Committee: A representative group of community members participated in four facilitated meetings between December 2025 and April 2026, engaging deeply with district data, school finance, budget simulation, and priority-setting for the school district.

Staff Engagement: On March 23, 2026, GRAS staff participated in a separate parallel session, contributing their professional perspectives on district priorities and reviewing community feedback gathered to that point.

At the conclusion of the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process, district leaders determined that additional student input was needed to provide a complete perspective to the school board. In May 2026, school staff visited Grand Rapids High School and Bigfork School to engage students in focused World Café conversations.

Geographic Reach: The process made deliberate efforts to include voices from across the district's large geographic footprint, including students, teachers and staff, and residents from Bigfork. Participants from Bigfork raised important concerns about equity of access — including that students in Bigfork cannot access the same virtual coursework as Grand Rapids students due to differences in bell schedules, and that staff in smaller buildings feel disparities in resources and opportunities. These voices were heard and documented.

*The Process: Four Meetings and Two Surveys*

The FORWARD Committee met four times, with each session building on the last.

**Meeting 1 (December 4, 2025)** - Introduced committee members to district background, community survey results, student academic data, and opportunities. Members explored the district's scale and complexity (nine sites, a geographic area comparable to the state of Delaware, flat enrollment over decades, and nearly half of families qualifying for free or reduced lunch). The homework charge was simple and open-ended: "What should be our district's priority?" as was completed by committee members using the Thoughtexchange tool.

**Meeting 2 (January 29, 2026)** - Focused on school finance in Minnesota and within GRAS. Members learned that revenues grew from $47.5M to $66.7M over the previous decade, but that expenditures had begun to outpace revenue. The district made approximately $9.8M in reductions between FY21 and FY26, eliminating roughly 84.6 FTEs. Committee members expressed concern about the complexity and inequity of Minnesota's school funding system, the gap between promised and actual federal IDEA (special education) funding, and the financial pressures unique to rural districts. The homework charge focused on trust: How can we build trust? (again using Thoughtexchange).

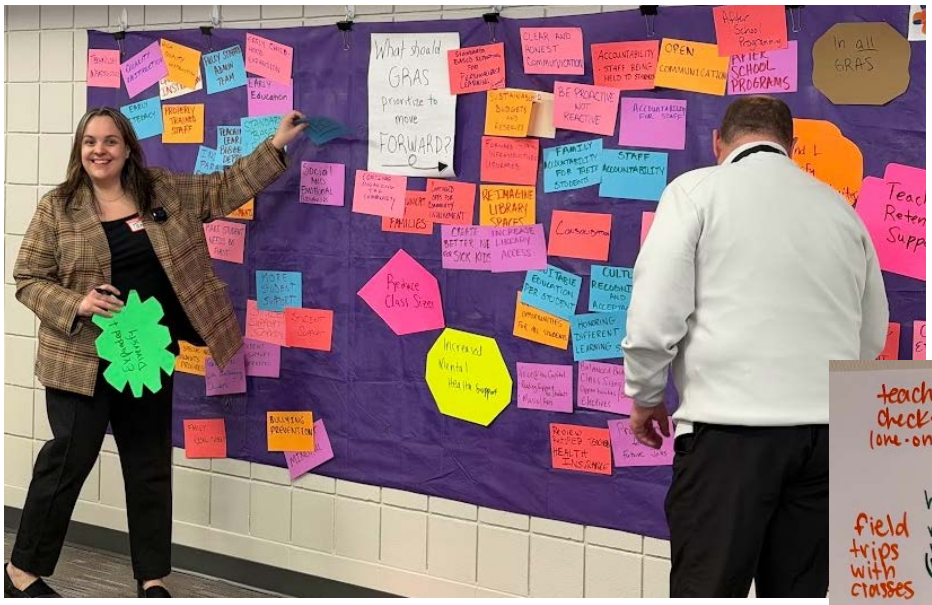
**Meeting 3 (March 24, 2026)** - Presented feedback from the March 23 staff session, reviewed survey data, engaged participants in a hands-on budget simulation, and facilitated a priorities consensus workshop. The budget exercise made real the constraints district leaders face: a large portion of the budget is locked before any discretionary decisions are made, every yes requires multiple no's, and rural geography adds unavoidable costs. The priorities workshop generated a rich list of ideas that were then clustered into themes.

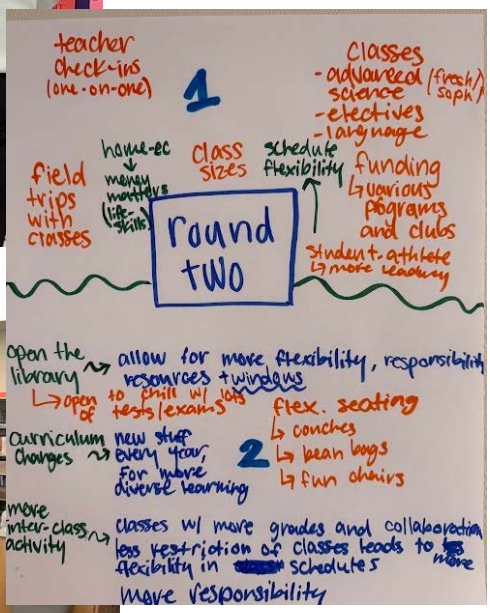
**Meeting 4 (April 23, 2026)** - The final session focused on resolution, reflection, and recommendation. Participants reviewed the April 2026 survey results, engaged in a structured workshop to identify the committee's top focus areas, and completed a priorities reflection in preparation for presenting findings to the School Board. The committee confirmed alignment around four core priorities.

*What the Community Said: Consistent Priorities Across Every Engagement*

**One of the most significant findings of the FORWARD process is the degree of alignment across stakeholders — survey respondents, committee members, teachers and staff, and residents in all areas of the school district.**

**Despite different roles, different relationships to the district, and different concerns, the same priorities surfaced consistently.**







**Meeting #3 Budget Exercise & Consensus Workshop**

Produced the same top themes:

- Class size
- Instructional quality and teacher retention
- Student support services and mental health
- Financial sustainability
- Expanded electives and career pathways



***Across every method, five priorities emerged consistently:***

1. Class Size and Staffing
2. Instructional Quality and Teacher Retention
3. Student Support Services , Especially Mental Health
4. Financial Stability and Operating Costs
5. Expanded Student Opportunities

These priorities represent a unified message from the GRAS community: the district must focus on the people, programs, and fiscal foundation that support every student, every day.

*What Stakeholders Want the Board to Know*

Throughout the process, participants were asked to reflect on what the School Board most needs to hear. Key themes from committee members' written reflections include:

**Student-centered decision-making must guide all choices.**

- Participants repeatedly said: put students first, keep students at the center, and let student needs be the driving force.

**Teachers are stretched beyond capacity.**

- One educator shared: "I put in an average of 10–12 unpaid hours each week of the school year. I am feeling defeated and broken. Nobody is coming behind me to pick up the pieces.
- Staff retention depends on meaningful support, not just acknowledgment.

**Mental health support is only reaching students in crisis, while many others are struggling.**

- More communication about available resources is needed.

**Equity of opportunity across the district (including for Bigfork) is a genuine concern.**

- Students in Bigfork on college-prep tracks are enrolled in online classes, or PSEO, because advanced courses are unavailable locally. This is not equitable, and it affects staff retention in those communities as well.

**Transparency builds trust.**

- The community wants clear communication about finances, decisions, and student progress — not just when things are going well, but consistently and honestly.
- Members advised (and encouraged) district leaders to speak from the heart, tell the truth, say the hard things even if it rocks the boat.

**The community is ready to help.**

- Multiple participants noted that the community is willing to do more (lobby, collaborate, sponsor, teach)
- Community members are ready to ACT; the school board should not assume the work of improving the district rests solely with school leaders and staff.

**Financial stability is a prerequisite for everything else.**

- As one participant put it: "Finances are the root of all ability to advance education, support students and teachers, and maintain buildings."



What the Fall 2025 Survey Established as a Foundation

The Fall 2025 survey established an important baseline context for the entire process. Key findings:

- The community generally values what GRAS provides — this process was not borne from dissatisfaction with educators, but from a desire to ensure the district can continue to deliver quality.

- 66% believe GRAS is underfunded.
  - Financial concern is not new — it was present before the committee convened and remained a consistent thread throughout the year.

- 80% are aware of budget cuts over the past six years.
  - The community is not uninformed; they are watching and want honest engagement about what comes next.

- Trust in leadership is moderate but improvable.
  - 33% somewhat trust and 30% trust the Board and Administration — meaning there is a real foundation to build on, and this process was specifically designed to strengthen it.

- Informal discussions and district communications are the primary information sources, not traditional media. This has implications for how the district communicates going forward.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This survey should be conducted annually to provide a longitudinal measurement of community opinion of GRAS.

*Conclusion*

The FORWARD process represents one of the most sustained and intentional community engagement efforts in Grand Rapids Area Schools' recent history. Over the course of seven months, hundreds of community members — parents, families, teachers, staff, students, community members, and long-term residents — engaged through multiple channels and methods to help define what the district should prioritize.

The result is not ambiguous. There is clear, cross-stakeholder alignment. The community and staff are pointing in the same direction. They want a school district that reduces class sizes, retains and supports strong teachers, addresses student mental health intentionally and actively, and operates on a fiscally sound foundation. They want equitable access to opportunities across all schools and all locations in the district. And they want a school board that listens, communicates honestly, and acts with students at the center.

***The district now has a clear signal — and a community ready to move forward together.***



## OUR MISSION

### Teaching and Learning for Life to Achieve Excellence.

To cultivate a **responsive and inclusive** learning environment where every student, supported by **faculty and the community,** develops the **resilience, readiness, and excellence** to embrace their potential and achieve **future success.**

RESPONSIVE | RESILIENT | READY | EXCELLENCE

## Introduction

The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee is rooted in a deep commitment to the students, families, staff, and communities that Grand Rapids Area Schools serve. Before examining priorities and options for the district's future, it is important to renew our grounding in who we are, what we stand for, and the breadth of what we do together.

*About the School District*
Grand Rapids Area Schools is located in the north woods of Itasca County, Minnesota, serving approximately 4,000 students across a wide range of programs that extend from birth through adult education. The district spans more than 2,200 square miles, encompassing the communities of Grand Rapids, Cohasset, Bigfork, Marcell, Warba, and many smaller towns and townships throughout the region.

The district operates nine sites and serves a geographically large and diverse community. Here, nearly half of families qualify for free or reduced-price meals and approximately 23% of students receive special education services.

By knowing these data points and understanding the realities of our stakeholders, we come together to address challenges and find creative solutions. In GRAS and in the work of the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee, these realities shape every decision and new idea about resource allocation, program design, and how the district fulfills its commitment to every learner while seeking to actualize its mission.

## Situation Analysis

Like most Minnesota school districts, Grand Rapids Area Schools face financial challenges. GRAS has been making budget reductions and seeking cost savings everywhere they can for years. For the 2026-27 school year, the school district is planning to maintain its budget with no reductions.

School district leaders recognized that they needed to educate and engage stakeholders now about the financial and facilities needs and make a specific and deliberate plan for the future of the school district. They designed a process to move all GRAS communities FORWARD, that featured:

***NEW INFORMATION / POST FORWARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS:***

*Recently (May 2026), the school district was informed that due to state funding shifts, based on actions taken during the 2026 legislative session, GRAS will receive $833,000 less in state funding for the coming school year.*

*This last-minute funding decrease, combined with anticipated significant expense increases — including facilities needs growing faster than long-term maintenance funding can support — more budget reductions are expected. This will likely cause the school district to seek options to generate additional revenue. One option... the district may ask voters to consider one or more referendum questions in a future election.*

*HOWEVER, THERE WAS A POSITIVE CHANGE THAT CAME OUT OF THE LEGISLATIVE SESSION - Seasonal Recreational Tax Base Replacement. This would ensure the cost of future referendums in equally spread across all taxpayers, not just the ones who live here full time.*



- An authentic, participatory process where all stakeholders had a voice
- Invited the participation of many voices with a diverse group of people on the committee; and many more sharing their input and feedback (including students)
- Multiple ways of engaging - through traditional communications tools, like surveys — and active outreach to all stakeholder groups: staff, students, Bigfork families, etc.

And so began the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process.

*Community Engagement in GRAS Goes Beyond FORWARD*

For Grand Rapids Area Schools, community engagement is the process to actively involve district stakeholders (families, staff, students, residents, and local partners) in authentic listening and learning, meaningful dialogue, and input-gathering to shape the future of our schools.

Our desired outcomes when engaging stakeholders are:

- Build public understanding, confidence, and trust through increased transparency.
- Provide an opportunity for community voices to be heard.
- Gain clarity on what matters most.
- Clarify the level of support for additional local funding vs. sustaining additional budget reductions and program cuts.

In addition to the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee, the school district engages stakeholders in surveys, special events and monthly conversations.

During the 2025-26 school year, the school district held a series of Community Conversations on the following topics:

- State of the District with Superintendent Matt Grose — Sept. 17, 2025
- Attendance Matters — Sept. 24, 2025
- Understanding High Stakes Assessments (MCA, STAR, Fastbridge) — Oct. 22, 2025
- Literacy & Science of Reading — Nov. 19, 2025
- Your Questions, Our Support — Dec. 10, 2025
- Mathapalooza — May 13, 2026

<u>CACR Plan & Stakeholder Meetings</u>
Grand Rapids Area Schools' Local Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness (CACR) Plan serves as a blueprint that demonstrates how current district initiatives and plans work together in a concerted effort to create a quality workforce equipped with the necessary skills for the 21st century. A group of dedicated stakeholders meet throughout the year to monitor the plan and confirm that district initiatives are moving forward together.




## *Did You Know?*

*The School Board meets at least twice annually in Bigfork, and regularly hosts listening sessions there to engage with stakeholders without requiring them to travel to Grand Rapids.*

## Research Part 1 - Fall 2025 Community Survey

Following the 2023 failed referendum, Grand Rapids Area Schools (GRAS) committed to a different approach: pause, listen, and engage intentionally before making major decisions about the future of the district.

School district leaders researched best practices extensively and carefully considered the options.

Fall 2025, GRAS hired DehlerPR (a strategic planning, engagement, communications, and public relations firm specializing in education) to assist in a comprehensive process of community engagement.

The DehlerPR Team studied available school district data extensively to learn and understand the history, culture, and current practices in GRAS. Next, they designed and facilitated a community survey (Fall 2025) to gain a baseline understanding of stakeholders' current thoughts and feelings about GRAS and focus areas for the future.

**CLICK HERE TO READ THE COMPLETE FALL 2025 SURVEY REPORT**

The survey identified critical areas needing attention as GRAS moves forward with community engagement:

1. Balancing financial constraints with the demands for educational excellence.
2. Creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration.
3. Finding innovative solutions.

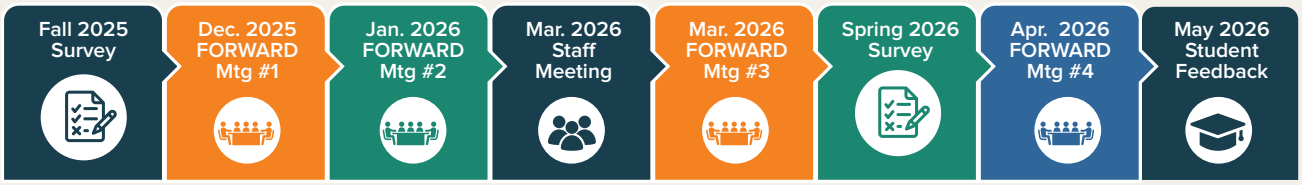
To accomplish this, survey respondents suggested a focus on:

- Enhancing Communication and Transparency: Focus on improving transparency and the accuracy of communications to build trust and stakeholder engagement.
- Broadening Engagement: Utilize more effective digital and social media platforms for information dissemination to reach a wider audience.
- Addressing Financial Concerns: Develop and communicate a clear financial strategy addressing budget concerns and potential impacts on educational services.
- Inclusive Education Strategies: Expand initiatives to better meet the learning needs of all students, ensuring that no student is left behind.
- Leveraging Community Stability: Engage long-term residents in conversations about the school district's future, utilizing their insights and commitment to the community.

FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

## ENGAGEMENT PROCESS / TIMELINE / OUTPUTS

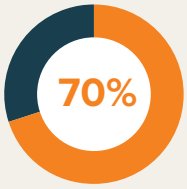
FORWARD Advisory Committee



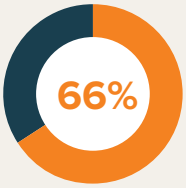

Note: In the Fall and Spring surveys, "community" includes students, parents/families, teachers/staff, and community members.

## KEY FINDINGS

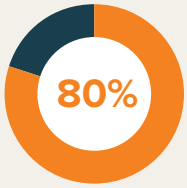
The Fall 2025 survey established an important context for the entire process.



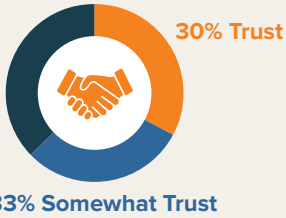

**70% of respondents rated education quality as Good or Excellent.**
The community generally values what GRAS provides — this process was not born from dissatisfaction with educators, but from a desire to ensure the district can continue to deliver quality.




**66% believe GRAS is underfunded.**
Financial concern is not new — it was present before the committee convened and remained a consistent thread throughout the year.




**80% are aware of budget cuts over the past six years.**
The community is not uninformed; they are watching and want honest engagement about what comes next.




**Trust in leadership is moderate but improvable.**
33% somewhat trust and 30% trust the Board and Administration — meaning there is a real foundation to build on, and this process was specifically designed to strengthen it.

## FORWARD MEETINGS ATTENDANCE NUMBERS:



*The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process was designed around participatory planning: an approach that prioritizes the voices, experiences, and perspectives of the people most connected to the work. Rather than presenting a predetermined conclusion for community reaction, participatory planning invites genuine dialogue and shared sense-making, ensuring that recommendations reflect the community's actual values and priorities.*

*To structure that dialogue, the committee employed three research-backed facilitation methods:*

*1 The Technology of Participation (ToP) Focus Conversation method guided participants through four levels of reflection — from objective facts, to personal reactions, to deeper interpretation, to decisions about what matters most — creating a structured path from information to insight.*

*2 The ToP Consensus Workshop method helped the full group move from individual perspectives to shared priorities, surfacing common themes across diverse viewpoints and building collective ownership of the outcomes.*

## Engagement Process - Theory & Practice

Concurrent to the Fall 2025 survey being "in the field" to gather stakeholder input, GRAS Leaders and the DehlerPR Team were planning the FORWARD process and recruiting committee members.

Applications were available to all stakeholders. The school district was able to accommodate all who applied AND was fortunate to receive a cross-section of stakeholders both in type (staff, parent, community) and city of residence.

The charge of the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee was to:

- Deeply examine the current situation within the public school system.
- Provide feedback, from each individual's perspective, on Grand Rapids Area Schools public education priorities.
- Discuss options for ensuring these priorities can be delivered, cost effectively, for the long-term benefit of all residents.

The committee reviewed school district data including history, budget and finance, teaching and learning/curriculum, best practices, and facilities in completing the above objectives.

Committee members also participated in a robust participatory process of engagement, ideating, and consensus building.

**The Four-Meeting FORWARD Process**

Over the course of the year, the committee met four times, each session building on the last to develop a comprehensive, community-grounded set of recommendations.

At the conclusion of the four-meeting FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process, committee members were asked to complete an evaluation survey to respond to the process, new participatory planning methods and personally-desired next steps.

**FORWARD Committee Evaluation Summary**

The FORWARD Committee evaluation reflected a largely positive experience for participants, with nearly half rating their involvement as extremely positive. Members appreciated the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of district operations and budgeting while engaging in meaningful discussions with fellow community members. Participants generally felt that the process created an environment where voices could be heard and valued, fostering collaboration, transparency, and community engagement. **Many viewed the committee as an important avenue for gathering diverse perspectives and strengthening connections between the district and its stakeholders.**

Participants expressed moderate to high confidence that the committee's feedback would help inform district decision-making, though opinions varied regarding the extent of its influence. Feedback highlighted the committee's role in promoting accountability and community involvement, while also identifying opportunities for improvement. Suggestions included providing more time to develop action-oriented solutions, expanding outreach efforts to encourage broader community participation, and increasing student involvement to ensure a wider range of perspectives is represented. Overall, the committee was seen as a valuable process that generated meaningful insights and strengthened community engagement in district planning efforts.

*3 The World Café method created an informal, conversational setting where participants rotated through small-group discussions on key topics, cross-pollinating ideas and ensuring that every voice had an opportunity to contribute.*

*Together, these methods ensured the FORWARD process was not simply a survey or a series of presentations, but a genuine community conversation — one that built trust, surfaced honest priorities, and produced recommendations grounded in the lived experience of Grand Rapids Area Schools students, families, staff, and community members.*



# FORWARD ★ MTG 1

| AGENDA ITEM (WHAT) | FACILITATION (WHY) |
|---|---|
| Mission Video | Ground committee members in students & learning. |
| School Board Chair Welcome | Explain the "Why" in the work and share the importance to the school board. |
| Housekeeping | Establish the process and group norms for the committee. |
| GRAS History & Analysis | Educate committee members to create an equal foundation for discussion. |
| Fall Community Survey Results | Show and tell broad community stakeholder input. |
| Preliminary Focus Areas | Focus conversation to gather detailed insights on a specific topic by encouraging participants to discuss their experiences, opinions, and perspectives in a guided group setting. |
| Homework Assignment | Reflection on what was learned and idea generation. |



December 4



Grand Rapids Area Schools FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

# FORWARD ★ MTG 2

| AGENDA ITEM (WHAT) | FACILITATION (WHY) |
|---|---|
| Welcome | Reminder/grounding for returning members and baseline expectations for new members. |
| Homework Harvest | LIVE ThoughtExchange to raise new ideas and summarize group thinking. |
| Mtg #1 Feedback Review | Sharing and transparency. |
| School Finance 101 Present | Educate committee members to create an equal foundation for discussion. |
| Discussion | A pair-and-share to encourage active participation by giving individuals time to think, discuss ideas with a partner, and then share insights with a larger group. |
| GRAS-specific Budget Info & Comparables | Focus conversation to gather detailed insights on a specific topic by encouraging participants to discuss their experiences, opinions, and perspectives in a guided group setting. |










*January 29*

Grand Rapids Area Schools | 2025–26 FORWARD Community Advisory Committee | FINAL REPORT TO THE SCHOOL BOARD 

# FORWARD ★ MTG 3

| AGENDA ITEM (WHAT) | FACILITATION (WHY) |
|---|---|
| Introduction: Mtgs 1-2 Recap | Refresh members about process and bring new members into the process. |
| Format for Mtgs 3-4 | Previously focused on learning, next focused on doing. |
| XYZ District Budget Exercise | Hands-on experience budgeting for a school district. Experience budget restrictions and limitations, timing of information, and gain clarity on budget priorities. |
| GRAS Future Priorities | A consensus workshop is a collaborative process in which participants brainstorm ideas, cluster related concepts into themes, and name those themes to build shared understanding and agreement. |
| Intersession Work | Priorities shared with teachers and staff for feedback. Community survey for feedback. Importance of broad stakeholder input. Request FORWARD Committee Members to seek input from their personal networks. |









Grand Rapids Area Schools FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

*March 24*

# FORWARD ★ MTG 4

| AGENDA ITEM (WHAT) | FACILITATION (WHY) |
|---|---|
| Intro - Process Overview | Charge Statement Review, Focus Question Review, Review Process. Grounding, perspective, preparation for final recommendation. |
| Present New Data | Share new data: Staff Feedback & Spring Community Survey Feedback. |
| What's Missing | Identify blindspots in the process. |
| Determine Final Focus Areas | World Cafe to raise new ideas and give all members the opportunity to provide feedback on all topics. A World Café is a structured conversation method where small groups rotate between tables, each focused on a different question, building on each other's ideas as they move – so that by the end, the whole room has contributed to every conversation. |
| Conclusion Discussion | Focus conversation to gather detailed insights on a specific topic by encouraging participants to discuss their experiences, opinions, and perspectives in a guided group setting. What did you observe? How has your thinking been impacted? Why is this important? What will you do next? |
| Conclusion & Thank You | Validation of importance - people and work. Request for continued participation. |



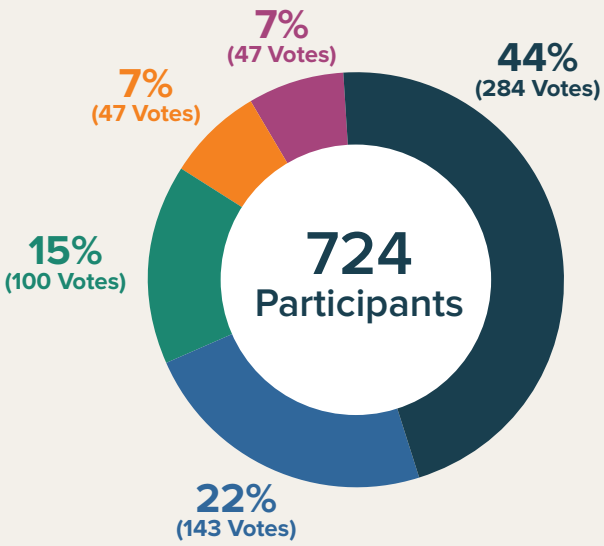





April 23

Grand Rapids Area Schools | 2025–26 FORWARD Community Advisory Committee | FINAL REPORT TO THE SCHOOL BOARD 

## The April 2026 survey asked 724 participants to identify their top priority.




- Class Size and Staffing
- Instructional Quality and Teacher Retention
- Maintaining Financial Stability and Covering Operating Costs
- Student Support Services, Especially Mental Health
- Expanded Student Opportunities
  (Career Pathways, Arts, Secondary Programs)

On March 23, 2026, GRAS staff participated in a separate feedback session, contributing their professional perspectives on district priorities and reviewing community feedback gathered to that point. Staff ranked their priorities (pictured here) in a similar order as those ranked by other groups. You will see greater specificity by staff members who have internal knowledge of the schools' functions and delivery to students. The detailed staff feedback was the first to show five priorities.

### STAFF RANKED PRIORITIES
AS FOLLOWS

1. HIGH-QUALITY, EQUITABLE EDUCATION
2. STRONG STAFFING - RECRUIT, RETAIN, SUPPORT
3. STUDENT WELL-BEING AND SAFE ENVIRONMENTS (tied with Financial Stability and Community Relationships)
4. CLASS SIZE AND LEARNING CONDITIONS
5. EXPANDED ELECTIVES AND CAREER PATHWAYS

Staff were clear that they view financial stability as a means to support classrooms and instruction, and not an end in itself.

## Research Part 2 - Spring 2026 Priorities & Focus Areas

A second round of research took place in the middle of the process with staff meetings and a second community survey. The goal here was to provide feedback to the FORWARD Committee on the first set of district priority recommendations.

*Engaging Teachers & Staff*
Prior to Meeting 3, GRAS staff participated in a separate session on March 23, 2026, to provide feedback on district priorities. Staff identified the following shared priorities:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Provide high-quality, equitable education for all students |
| 2 | Recruit and retain strong staff |
| 3 | Support student well-being and safe environments |
| 4 | Maintain financial stability and strong community relationships |
| 5 | Improve class sizes and learning conditions |
| 6 | Expand opportunities for future readiness |

When asked to rank the priorities, staff consistently placed instruction and staffing at the top. The clearest signal from staff was: teaching and learning as the core mission, supported by staffing stability.

**What Staff Feedback Suggests**

- Teaching and learning are the core mission
- Staffing stability is key for student success
- Student well-being is foundational, not secondary
- Financial stability matters because it supports classrooms
- Expanded opportunities are important, but only after core conditions are strong

*Engaging the Entire GRAS Community*

Similarly, a community survey was conducted to measure public opinion overall on the district priorities identified by the FORWARD Committee. The 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 | Top Priority | % Respondents |
|---|---|---|
| #1 | Class Size & Staffing | 44% |
| #2 | Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention | 22% |
| #3 | Financial Stability & Operating Costs | 15% |
| #4 | Student Support Services (especially Mental Health) | 7% |
| #5 | Expanded Student Opportunities (Career Pathways, Arts, Programs) | 7% |



## Student Feedback

District leaders believed more student input was needed to provide a complete perspective to the school board. In May, school staff visited both high schools to engage in focused conversation about the changes and improvements students want to see.

**A full report of the students' feedback is included in the Appendix.**

A few highlights to note:

### *Strongest shared ground*

Students at both Grand Rapids and Bigfork independently arrived at the same core desires: teachers who genuinely care and reach out, school traditions that build community, hands-on and active learning, meaningful recognition, and proactive mental health support. These aren't aspirational — students are telling us they already know what works, and they want more of it.

### *Where the schools diverge*

Grand Rapids High School concerns are largely academic in nature (grading systems, workload, standardized testing, IB access gaps, AI ethics in coursework). Bigfork's concerns are more structural: resource inequity, facility conditions, and consistent school procedure. These distinctions suggest different near-term action priorities at each site even as the broader vision remains unified.

### *The clearest board-level signal*

Seven actionable recommendations emerged from the data. The top four — deeper learning over compliance, stronger teacher relationships, hands-on/career-relevant learning, and protection of extracurricular programs — were echoed by students at both schools without prompting. That level of cross-site consistency is a strong signal for where FORWARD focus areas should land.

***IMPORTANT NOTE:***
*Feedback results were consistent across every feedback 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.*

## Alignment with FORWARD Community Survey Top Priorities

The April 2026 community survey identified four consistent top priorities across all three FORWARD engagement exercises. Student World Café feedback directly reinforces each of them.

| # | Forward Priority | Student Voice Alignment |
|---|---|---|
| #1 | **Class Size and Staffing** | Students at both schools raised concerns about class sizes and shrinking student-to-teacher ratios. Requests for one-on-one check-ins and small-group work reflect a desire for more individualized attention. |
| #2 | **Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention** | The single most consistent student message: passionate, caring, engaging teachers change everything. Students named specific teachers by name and asked for enthusiasm, feedback, and proactive support as non-negotiables. |
| #3 | **Student Support Services (Esp. Mental Health)** | Both schools independently raised mental health as a concern. Students called for normalized support services, quarterly counselor check-ins, and teachers trained to notice students who are struggling silently. |
| #4 | **Maintaining Financial Stability & Operating Costs** | Bigfork students expressed direct awareness of budget pressures — broken equipment unfixed, labs unused, teachers spending personal funds. Students asked for transparent, equitable resource allocation across programs. |
| #5 | **Expand hands-on, life skills & career-relevant learning** | Reinstate or expand home economics, financial literacy, shop, and career exploration. Students want learning that connects to real life — not just college prep or screen-based work. |

Blue rows = Top 4 priorities, consistent across all three FORWARD engagement exercises. Student feedback reinforces all four.

## Results & Recommendations

At the end of Meeting #4 of the FORWARD Community Advisory Taskforce, the following Focus Areas were recommended for future consideration and study by the school board. They also offered comments for context on “Why it matters” to stakeholders.

| Rank | 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. |

The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee also recommended the following:

- Keep engaging with stakeholders in this manner and around this topic.
- Stakeholders felt valued and were energized for the future of GRAS throughout these conversations.

*Class size and staffing emerged as the top priority across all stakeholder groups, though needs vary across the district. In Grand Rapids, stakeholders identified a need for larger classrooms, more flexible learning environments, additional staff, and expanded secondary electives.*

*Staffing challenges take a different form in Bigfork where students expressed concerns about declining student-to-teacher ratios and a desire for more individualized attention and hands-on learning. Across both high schools, students placed a strong value on teacher passion, meaningful relationships, and supportive connections with staff.*

*These priorities represent a unified message from the Grand Rapids Area Schools community: the district must focus on the people, programs, and fiscal foundation that support every student, every day.*

## Conclusions & Future Considerations

**Conclusion**

The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process represents one of the most sustained and intentional community engagement efforts in Grand Rapids Area Schools' recent history. Over the course of seven months, hundreds of community members — parents, families, teachers, staff, students, community members, and long-term residents — engaged through multiple channels and methods to help define what the district should prioritize.

The result is not ambiguous. There is clear, cross-stakeholder alignment. The community and staff are pointing in the same direction. They want a school district that reduces class sizes, retains and supports strong teachers, addresses student mental health intentionally and actively, and operates on a fiscally sound foundation. They want equitable access to opportunities across all schools and all locations in the district. And they want a school board that listens, communicates honestly, and acts with students at the center.



***The district now has a clear signal — and a community ready to move forward together.***

One of the most significant findings of the FORWARD process is the degree of alignment across stakeholders — across survey respondents, committee members, staff, and geography. Despite different roles, different relationships to the district, and different concerns, the same priorities surfaced consistently:

- Priority #1: Class Size & Staffing
- Priority #2: Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention
- Priority #3: Student Support Services (Mental Health)
- Priority #4: Financial Stability & Operating Costs
- Priority #5: Expanded Student Opportunities

**While some of the identified items may be able to be added with a reallocation of current resources, many will require additional funding to be secured.**

Based on the many engagements during the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process, GRAS residents are READY and WILLING to support the necessary steps to move forward.

When to move forward and how to do so will require extensive discussion by the School Board and possibly additional data.



**Future Considerations & Timeline**

The following ideas are presented by DehlerPR after synthesizing the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee work. The GRAS School Board and school district leaders should:

***Summer 2026***

1. Write a formal and public response to the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee
    a. Include next steps
    b. Consider publishing as a news release or letter to the editor, in addition to regular school district channels

2. Develop an Action Plan for GRAS to meet the identified priorities
    a. No cost, Low cost options to move forward
    b. Significant cost items and possible funding mechanisms

3. Make a plan to continue engaging stakeholders in the priorities identified by the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee
    a. Community conversations by priority?
    b. Team with specific groups already engaged in the work?
    c. Seek expert counsel in specific areas (finance, construction, legal, etc.)

4. Develop a strategic communications plan
    a. Start communicating the need for a future referendum to all stakeholders NOW.

***Fall 2026***

1. Complete an Annual Community Survey
    a. Repeat Fall 2025 Survey to show growth/movement; confirm priorities

2. Continie FORWARD process
    a. Publish progress report monthly/quarterly

3. Publish Full Financial/Annual Report
    a. Situation: Compensatory loss of $883K, Minerals bill, Seasonal rec bill impacts

4. Consider Facilities Audit or Facilities Planning Process
    a. On-going facilities and finance needs
    b. $8-10 million in roofs to be repaired (School Board Levy instead of LTFM)
    c. HS needs updated and flexible learning spaces to support today's learning
    d. Finance & Budgeting
        i. Explain LTFM funding
        ii. Explain the school district's debt and management lens

***Winter 2026-27***

1. State of the Schools
2. Referendum direction

***Spring 2027***

1. May survey
2. Referendum decision
3. Referendum organization
4. Referendum beginning communications

## Thank You

The 2025-26 Grand Rapids Area Public Schools FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of Julie Rasmussen, Confidential Assistant to the Superintendent & School Board, and Tanis Henderson, High School Counselor and ToP Facilitator.

And THANK YOU to the entire community for participating in the process though surveys, focus groups, or as a member of the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee.

*Strategy and Facilitation Guidance by DehlerPR*

A special THANK YOU to the entire DehlerPR Team for their counsel, strategy, and training for local facilitation in participatory planning throughout the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process.

DehlerPR is a strategic communications firm specializing in community engagement and public relations for school districts. With expertise in data-driven messaging, coalition building, and campaign execution, DehlerPR helps organizations navigate complex community issues and achieve successful outcomes through transparent, professional communication strategies. Go to dehlerpr.com for more information.



# Appendix


Minnesota
School of
Excellence
Cohasset
Elementary School
2024-2032
Cohasset Elementary

# FORWARD Advisory Committee

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## Executive Summary: Meeting #1 (December 4, 2025)

**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

Grand Rapids Area Schools (GRAS) officials presented information to committee members who had several opportunities to provide feedback. Below is Meeting 1's place in the full FORWARD 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 |

### 2. District Information and Community Survey Results

Key themes emerged from the district overview and initial community survey data presented at this meeting:

| Theme | What Committee Members Heard |
|---|---|
| **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 Indiginous 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. |

**KEY SIGNALS:** Community members were surprised by the district's geographic size (comparable to the state of Delaware), its stable enrollment since the 1950s, and the high proportion of students with significant needs. A key contradiction emerged: survey results showed 70%+ satisfaction with most district metrics, yet notable distrust in school board leadership — a tension the committee identified as a priority to address.

## 3. Student Achievement Data and Student Opportunities

The committee reviewed MCA proficiency data and discussed the complexity of measuring student success. Key discussion themes:

| Theme | What Committee Members Heard |
|---|---|
| **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. |

**KEY SIGNALS:** While overall proficiency rates (~50%) and math scores (~47%) were sobering, committee members noted GRAS performs above state average and boasts strong graduation rates (213 of 229 seniors expected to graduate in 2026). The group called for better local benchmarks and more nuanced ways to communicate student progress to families and the broader community.

## 4. Community Priorities: Exit Ticket Responses

At the close of the meeting, community members identified their most important priorities for GRAS on post-it note exit tickets. Four overarching themes emerged:

| Priority | What Community Members Said |
|---|---|
| **Trust & Communication** | Build trust through transparency and better communication about decisions, test scores, and student progress. |
| **Equitable Education** | Achieve truly equitable education across all schools in the geographically large district — with adequate funding, manageable class sizes, and classroom support for teachers. |
| **Student Success** | Foster student success by celebrating achievements, ensuring students feel safe and welcomed, and addressing the mental health crisis. Students and teachers are more than test scores. |
| **Community Involvement** | Mobilize community involvement; 318 staff cannot do this alone. Innovate beyond outdated education models and apply practical life skills earlier. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **OVERALL TAKEAWAY** | The community's strongest and most consistent themes: (1) rebuilding trust through transparency and communication, (2) ensuring equitable education across all schools and communities, (3) addressing student and teacher needs including mental health and class size, and (4) engaging the broader community in the work ahead. These themes set the foundation for the FORWARD process. |

## 5. What Comes Next

| Item | Details |
|---|---|
| **Committee Homework** | Members were asked to reflect on district priorities and gather input from peers and community members before Meeting 2. |
| **Meeting 2 Focus** | School Finance in Minnesota & GRAS — a finance overview and trust-building activities. |
| **Broader Engagement** | Continued interest in expanding survey reach beyond current parents to include all community stakeholders. |

*Thank you to everyone who participated in Meeting 1.*

*Your voice shapes the future of Grand Rapids Area Schools.*

**FORWARD means forward.**

FORWARD Advisory Committee

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# Executive Summary: Meeting #2 (January 29, 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 #2 (the second of four sessions) focused on school finance — providing committee members with a deep understanding of how Minnesota funds public education, how GRAS compares to peer districts, and where the budget has been reduced over recent years.

| 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 — YOU ARE HERE** |
| Meeting 3 | Budget Exercise & Priorities | Staff input, budget simulation, consensus workshop |
| Meeting 4 | Resolve, Reflect, Recommend | Consensus workshop — prepare board recommendation (April 23, 6:00 PM) |

## 2. Financial Overview

| Topic | Key Findings |
|---|---|
| **General Fund Revenue & Expenditures (FY16–FY26)** | Revenue grew from $47.5M to $66.7M over the decade, while expenditures rose from $47.2M to $67.6M. In recent years expenditures have begun to outpace revenue, signaling a tightening fiscal outlook. |
| **Budget Reductions (FY21–FY26)** | The district made ~$9.8M in total reductions over this period, eliminating ~84.6 FTEs. The largest cuts came in FY22–FY23, with personnel accounting for $7.6M of the total savings. |
| **Peer District Comparisons (FY25, per ADM)** | Twelve districts were compared across revenue, expenditures, instruction, administration, and operations & maintenance on a per-student basis. Deer River and Hibbing ranked among the highest spenders, while Rock Ridge stood out with the highest Operations & Maintenance costs (~$3,915/student). |

| KEY THEME | **The overarching theme is fiscal sustainability — documenting where cuts have been made and benchmarking spending against peer districts.** |
|---|---|

## 3. Homework: District Priorities

### What is the priority of Grand Rapids Area Schools?

"The priority for Grand Rapids Area Schools centers on providing quality and equitable education, reducing class sizes, and retaining qualified teachers and staff. There is a strong emphasis on offering diverse electives and opportunities to prepare students for future success. Financial transparency and stability are crucial, alongside fostering strong community relationships and engagement. Addressing mental health support, discipline, and reducing teacher burnout are also highlighted. The district aims to create a supportive, safe, and inclusive environment that aligns with Minnesota standards, ensuring all students, including those in Bigfork, receive a comprehensive educational experience."

## 4. Feedback Questions

| Question | Summary of Participant Responses |
|---|---|
| **What stood out to you about Minnesota's system of school funding?** | Participants were struck by the complexity and inequity of Minnesota's school funding system. Many were surprised that federal IDEA funding remains at only 17% instead of the promised 40%, leaving districts to cover the gap while special education enrollment climbs. The lack of funding keeping pace with inflation was a major concern, as was the heavy dependency on state funding combined with unfunded mandates. Several participants noted the disconnect between constitutional language about funding schools and reality, expressing frustration that the community isn't more aware of these funding complexities and constraints. |
| **What questions do you have regarding school funding?** | Participants raised numerous questions about understanding and improving school funding. Many wanted to know how to better educate the community about funding realities and how Minnesota compares to other states. There was strong interest in legislative solutions and accountability, particularly regarding how to hold the federal government responsible for meeting its 40% IDEA commitment. Questions included inquiries about levy maximums, the equalization formula, and whether restricted funds could be redirected. Participants also sought clarity on balancing advocacy for increased state funding against requests for local tax increases. |
| **What is one thing you learned about the Grand Rapids Area Schools financial situation?** | Participants gained significant insights into GRAS's financial challenges and recovery. Many were surprised by how dire the situation had been, with the fund balance reaching just 1.6% in FY22 — nearly causing the district to miss payroll. The improvement post-2022 was noted, though concerns remain about recent negative trends. Participants appreciated learning where money is allocated and how GRAS compares to similar districts. The realization that these struggles aren't unique to GRAS but reflect systemic funding issues affecting districts statewide was eye-opening for many. |
| **What questions do you have about the Grand Rapids Area Schools financial situation?** | Participants posed detailed questions about GRAS's financial future and decision-making. Many wanted to know when cuts might end and positions could be restored, how to increase enrollment amid declining population, and what the advocacy plan is for changing per-pupil funding. Questions about specific operational costs — such as running Cohasset Elementary or recent administrative hires — reflected concerns about resource allocation. Participants sought more granular information about spending, class size impacts, teacher compensation, and special education trends. Many asked how the district plans to maintain momentum toward strategic goals while navigating financial constraints. |

## 5. Next Steps

| Item | Details |
|---|---|
| **Meeting #3** | March 28 — Budget Exercise & Priorities. Participants will complete a hands-on budget simulation and priorities consensus workshop. |
| **Homework** | Committee members were asked to reflect on how the district can increase transparency and trust with the broader community. |

# FORWARD Advisory Committee

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# 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.**

## 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.

| 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 — YOU ARE HERE** |
| Meeting 4 | Resolve, Reflect, Recommend | Consensus workshop — prepare board recommendation (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 (tied) | **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.

## 3. Homework Survey: Transparency & Trust

Between Meetings 2 and 3, committee members responded to two questions about building trust with the community.

### 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

- **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 are 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.<br><br>The strongest shared themes: (1) class size and staffing, (2) student support services, (3) financial sustainability, and (4) instructional quality. |

## 6. Next Steps

| Item | Details |
|---|---|
| **Meeting #4** | April 23 at 6:00 PM — Resolve, Reflect, Recommend. The committee will work toward consensus and prepare a formal recommendation for the Board. |
| **Community ThoughtExchange** | A community-wide survey link will be distributed. Committee members are encouraged to participate and to encourage their networks to respond. |

# FORWARD Advisory Committee

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# 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, (4) financial stability and operating costs, and (5) expanded student opportunities. 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.

# FORWARD ★ MTG 1

| AGENDA ITEM (WHAT) | FACILITATION (WHY) |
|---|---|
| Mission Video | Ground committee members in students & learning. |
| School Board Chair Welcome | Explain the "Why" in the work and share the importance to the school board. |
| Housekeeping | Establish the process and group norms for the committee. |
| GRAS History & Analysis | Educate committee members to create an equal foundation for discussion. |
| Fall Community Survey Results | Show and tell broad community stakeholder input. |
| Preliminary Focus Areas | Focus conversation to gather detailed insights on a specific topic by encouraging participants to discuss their experiences, opinions, and perspectives in a guided group setting. |
| Homework Assignment | Reflection on what was learned and idea generation. |



December 4



Grand Rapids Area Schools FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

# FORWARD ★ MTG 2

| AGENDA ITEM (WHAT) | FACILITATION (WHY) |
|---|---|
| Welcome | Reminder/grounding for returning members and baseline expectations for new members. |
| Homework Harvest | LIVE ThoughtExchange to raise new ideas and summarize group thinking. |
| Mtg #1 Feedback Review | Sharing and transparency. |
| School Finance 101 Present | Educate committee members to create an equal foundation for discussion. |
| Discussion | A pair-and-share to encourage active participation by giving individuals time to think, discuss ideas with a partner, and then share insights with a larger group. |
| GRAS-specific Budget Info & Comparables | Focus conversation to gather detailed insights on a specific topic by encouraging participants to discuss their experiences, opinions, and perspectives in a guided group setting. |










*January 29*

# FORWARD ★ MTG 3

| AGENDA ITEM (WHAT) | FACILITATION (WHY) |
|---|---|
| Introduction: Mtgs 1-2 Recap | Refresh members about process and bring new members into the process. |
| Format for Mtgs 3-4 | Previously focused on learning, next focused on doing. |
| XYZ District Budget Exercise | Hands-on experience budgeting for a school district. Experience budget restrictions and limitations, timing of information, and gain clarity on budget priorities. |
| GRAS Future Priorities | A consensus workshop is a collaborative process in which participants brainstorm ideas, cluster related concepts into themes, and name those themes to build shared understanding and agreement. |
| Intersession Work | Priorities shared with teachers and staff for feedback. Community survey for feedback. Importance of broad stakeholder input. Request FORWARD Committee Members to seek input from their personal networks. |









Grand Rapids Area Schools FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

*March 24*

# FORWARD ★ MTG 4

| AGENDA ITEM (WHAT) | FACILITATION (WHY) |
|---|---|
| Intro - Process Overview | Charge Statement Review, Focus Question Review, Review Process. Grounding, perspective, preparation for final recommendation. |
| Present New Data | Share new data: Staff Feedback & Spring Community Survey Feedback. |
| What's Missing | Identify blindspots in the process. |
| Determine Final Focus Areas | World Cafe to raise new ideas and give all members the opportunity to provide feedback on all topics. A World Café is a structured conversation method where small groups rotate between tables, each focused on a different question, building on each other's ideas as they move – so that by the end, the whole room has contributed to every conversation. |
| Conclusion Discussion | Focus conversation to gather detailed insights on a specific topic by encouraging participants to discuss their experiences, opinions, and perspectives in a guided group setting. What did you observe? How has your thinking been impacted? Why is this important? What will you do next? |
| Conclusion & Thank You | Validation of importance - people and work. Request for continued participation. |








April 23

Grand Rapids Area Schools FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

FORWARD Advisory Committee

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# Community Survey Executive Summary (November 2025)

**PURPOSE**

**The FORWARD Community Survey gathered perspectives from 833 Grand Rapids Area School District residents on education quality, financial stewardship, trust in administration, and community engagement — forming the foundation for the FORWARD process.**

## 1. About This Survey

Beginning Fall 2025, the Grand Rapids Area School District started a yearlong journey of conversation and collaboration that puts staff, students, parents, and the community at the center of our schools' future — **FORWARD**. From October 24–November 5, 833 residents responded to an online survey; 465 answered all questions and added their own comments.

| Survey Timeline & Communications | Topics Covered |
|---|---|
| **Timeline:** October 24 – November 5, 2025<br>**Total Respondents:** 833 \| **Full Completions:** 465 (56%) | Education quality & extracurricular activities<br>Financial stewardship & trust in administration<br>Communication channels & community engagement |

## 2. Participation & Demographics

| Demographic | Finding | Share |
|---|---|---|
| **Respondents with school-age children at GRAS** | **Direct stakeholders; majority of participants** | **66%** |
| Long-term residents (30+ years in district) | Stable, established community with deep roots | 31% |

**VOICES STILL NEEDED**

Future engagement should prioritize **students** and **broader community members without school-age children** to ensure all perspectives shape the FORWARD process.

## 3. Community Survey Key Takeaways

### Quality of Education & Extracurricular Activities

- **Quality of Education:** 49% rated overall quality as "Good" and 21% as "Excellent." However, 23% rated it only "Fair," indicating room for improvement.
- **Meeting Learning Needs:** 64% believe GRAS meets most students' learning needs; only 7% feel all students' needs are met — suggesting a need for more inclusive strategies.
- **Extracurricular Activities:** 49% agreed GRAS provides high-quality extracurricular activities, with 31% strongly agreeing.

### Financial Stewardship & Trust

- **Financial Stewardship:** Confidence is mixed — 36% agree the Board and Administration are good stewards, while 21% disagree and 15% strongly disagree.
- **Trust in Administration:** Moderate — 33% somewhat trust and 30% trust the School Board and Administration.

### Communication & Community Involvement

- **Satisfaction with Decision-Making and Communications:** Stand at 55% and 51% respectively — positive, but with notable room for improvement.
- **Primary Information Sources:** Digital communication and social media are increasingly important; traditional newsletters and local newspapers are less utilized.
- **Communication Attributes:** Communications are seen as consistent (41%) and clear (38%), but transparency (22%) and accuracy (25%) need improvement.

### Financial Awareness & Challenges

- **Funding & Budget Awareness:** 66% do not believe GRAS is adequately funded. Awareness of past budget cuts (66%) and future challenges (90%) is high — financial concerns are top-of-mind.

## 4. Community Survey Recommendations

| # | Recommendation | Description |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Enhance Communication & Transparency** | **Improve transparency and accuracy of communications to build trust and stakeholder engagement.** |
| 2 | **Broaden Engagement** | Utilize digital and social media platforms more effectively to reach a wider audience. |
| 3 | **Address Financial Concerns** | **Develop and communicate a clear financial strategy addressing budget concerns and impacts on educational services.** |
| 4 | **Inclusive Education Strategies** | Expand initiatives to better meet the learning needs of all students, ensuring no student is left behind. |
| 5 | **Leverage Community Stability** | **Engage long-term residents in conversations about the district's future, utilizing their insights and commitment.** |

## 5. Conclusion

This report underscores the critical areas needing attention as GRAS moves forward with community engagement. Balancing financial constraints with the demands for educational excellence and meaningful collaboration is a key challenge that requires careful management and innovative solutions.

The findings provide a comprehensive overview of community perceptions and expectations — a foundation for a transparent, collaborative process aligned with our strategic directions. Thank you to all who participated. Your feedback will shape how we communicate, address challenges, and build a brighter future for every student.

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FORWARD Advisory Committee

## FORWARD Community Advisory Committee Focus Areas Priority Survey Results

April 23, 2026

**724 Participants**

**89% Completion Rate**

## About This Survey

The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee is completing its year-long work examining district conditions and identifying priorities for the long-term, cost-effective delivery of public education. The committee developed eight Focus Areas and asked students, parents and families, staff, and community members to rank them by importance.

| Survey Timeline & Communications | Survey Focus Areas developed through: |
|---|---|
| Timeline: April 17–22, 2026<br>Communications: Announced April 17; Reminder April 21 | 1. Mock school budgeting exercise<br>2. Consensus workshop discussions<br>3. This community-wide survey |

## Participation

707 of 724 participants identified their role (multiple selections allowed):

| Role | # Respondents | % of Participants |
|---|---|---|
| **Parent / Family** | **460** | **65%** |
| Staff | 268 | 38% |
| Community Member | 99 | 14% |
| Other | 24 | 3% |
| Student | 13 | 2% |

*Multiple roles allowed; percentages exceed 100%.*

**Voices Still Needed:** Future engagement should focus on **students (2%)** and **community members at large (14%).**

## Priority Rankings (Results reflect the number who chose each area as their top priority.)

| | Focus Area | Top Votes | Share |
|---|---|---|---|
| **#1** | **Class Size and Staffing** | **287** | **44%** |
| **#2** | **Instructional Quality and Teacher Retention** | **143** | **22%** |
| **#3** | **Maintaining Financial Stability and Covering Operating Costs** | **100** | **15%** |
| **#4** | **Student Support Services (Especially Mental Health)** | **47** | **7%** |
| **#5** | **Expanded Student Opportunities (Career Pathways, Arts, Secondary Programs)** | **47** | **7%** |
| #6 | Long-Range Vision Ideas (e.g., New High School Concept) | 9 | 1% |
| #7 | Early Childhood and Preschool Expansion | 7 | 1% |
| #8 | Facilities and Infrastructure | 6 | 1% |

*Blue rows = Top 4 priorities, consistent across all three FORWARD engagement exercises.*

## Consistent Top 4 Priorities

Across all three engagement exercises — the mock budgeting exercise, the consensus workshop, and this community survey — the same four priorities emerged:

| | |
|---|---|
| **#1** | **Class Size and Staffing** |
| **#2** | **Instructional Quality and Teacher Retention** |
| **#3** | **Student Support Services (Especially Mental Health)** |
| **#4** | **Maintaining Financial Stability and Covering Operating Costs** |

## Conclusion

These four priorities reflect a clear, unified message from the Grand Rapids Area Schools community: the district must focus on the people, programs, and fiscal foundation that support every student, every day.

The results are consistent across all engagement methods — the budgeting exercise, consensus workshop, and this survey — demonstrating that these are not passing concerns but deeply held community values. The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee will carry these priorities forward as the basis for its recommendations to the school board, guiding long-term, cost-effective planning for the benefit of all district residents.

## Next Steps

The FORWARD Committee will use these results to:

- Finalize recommended Focus Areas for the school district
- Present recommendations to the Grand Rapids Area Schools Board of Education
- Guide long-term, cost-effective planning for the benefit of all district residents

| | |
|---|---|
| Grand Rapids Area Schools \| grandrapidsschools.org | FORWARD Community Advisory Committee \| April 2026 |

# Student Voice Report: World Café Feedback

Grand Rapids High School & Bigfork School · May 2026

**2** SCHOOLS

**3** ROUNDS

## About This Report

At the conclusion of the FORWARD Community Advisory Committee process, district leaders determined that additional student input was needed to provide a complete perspective to the school board. In May 2026, school staff visited Grand Rapids High School and Bigfork School to engage students in focused World Café conversations. This report synthesizes findings from all three rounds of dialogue.

**Survey Timeline & Method**
World Café format: structured small-group dialogue across three rounds.
Conducted: May 2026 | Schools: GRHS · Bigfork

**World Café Rounds**
1. Round 1: Bright Spots & Appreciation
2. Round 2: Areas for Concern & Deepening Inquiry
3. Round 3: Action & Future Possibilities

**Context Note:** The broader FORWARD Priority Survey (April 2026, 724 participants) recorded only 13 student respondents — just 2% of participants. These World Café sessions were convened specifically to address that gap and ensure student perspectives are fully represented before the school board presentation.

## School Profiles

**Grand Rapids High School (GRHS)**
A larger comprehensive high school with IB programming, performing arts, and a wide range of athletics. Students highlighted strong school spirit traditions, valued teacher relationships, and called for reforms to grading practices, academic workload, and student support systems.

**Bigfork School**
A smaller K–12 community school where cross-grade relationships and close community ties are central strengths. Students emphasized hands-on learning and school traditions, and raised concerns about resource equity, consistent discipline, and declining program opportunities.

## Round 1: Bright Spots & Appreciation

Students at both schools were asked to identify what is already working well — the traditions, relationships, and experiences that make them feel engaged, proud, and supported.

| Theme | Key Student Voices | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **School Spirit & Traditions**<br>Pep fests, dances, homecoming, sports | GRHS: "Pep fests, marching band, HOCO week, student sections." Bigfork: "Air bands, spirit weeks, homecoming parade, all sports traditions." | Both |
| **Passionate, Caring Teachers**<br>Check-ins, engagement, belonging | GRHS: "Caring about learning over grades." Bigfork: "Having a close relationship with a teacher makes you want to come to school." | Both |
| **Student Recognition**<br>Awards, counselor meetings, celebrations | GRHS: "Routine counselor meetings, student awards." Bigfork: "HOWL tickets, honor roll, student of the month, reward ceremony." | Both |

| Theme | Key Student Voices | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Arts, Music & Extracurriculars**<br>**Programs that build school identity** | GRHS: "Music/arts programs, marching band, Unified Special Olympics." Bigfork: "Air bands, shop projects, science fair." | Both |
| **IB Program & Student Voice**<br>Advanced coursework, student council | "Our IB Program + Teachers!" and "Student council having a voice" were repeatedly cited as top strengths. | GRHS only |
| **K–12 Community Connection**<br>Cross-grade bonds, small community feel | "Being able to connect with the kids (K–12)" and "High school mixing with elementary" were unique Bigfork strengths. | Bigfork only |

## Round 2: Areas for Concern & Deepening Inquiry

Students shifted focus to challenges — not to list problems, but to open space for possibility and ensure concerns were heard constructively.

| Theme | Key Student Voices | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Mental Health & Student Visibility**<br>**Access, proactive outreach** | GRHS: "Improve MH." Bigfork: "A lot of students fly under the radar and struggle" — both raised this independently. | Both |
| **Declining Program Opportunities**<br>**Sports, arts, extracurriculars eroding** | GRHS: "Lack of sports practice spaces, possibly more clubs." Bigfork: "Loss of interest in music, art & sports… constant change of coaching." | Both |
| **Academic Workload & Grading Pressure**<br>Busywork, testing, grade focus | "Grades are just busywork… too much value on standardized testing." Multiple posters echoed this theme. | GRHS only |
| **Schedule & Course Access Gaps**<br>Advanced courses, flexibility, library | "Gap between remedial classes and IB… a functional library (can't check out books)… schedule flexibility." | GRHS only |
| **Fairness & Consistent Discipline**<br>Favoritism, dress code, both sides | "Family bias / favoritism… girls targeted in dress code… teachers hearing both sides of the story." | Bigfork only |
| **Resource & Facility Gaps**<br>Outdated tools, inaccessible spaces | "Art is limited when our tools are old and broken… chemistry lab we can't afford… weight room locked up… we need a real track." | Bigfork only |

## Round 3: Action & Future Possibilities

Students identified specific, actionable changes for teachers, administrators, and the school board to implement.

| Action Priority | Student Directive | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Depth over Compliance**<br>**Fewer, richer assignments with feedback** | "Dive deep as opposed to checking boxes… one more in-depth assignment with feedback… discussions between students." | Both |
| **Teacher Passion & Proactive Outreach**<br>**Engagement, reaching struggling students** | GRHS: "Students are more excited when teachers are also excited." Bigfork: "Teachers taking initiative to reach out to students who might be struggling is the biggest." | Both |
| **Hands-On & Career-Relevant Learning**<br>**Life skills, movement, real world** | "Home ec classes + useful life classes… hands-on work / more engagement… increased opportunity for career exploration." | Both |
| **Normalize Mental Health Support**<br>**Counselor access, destigmatized services** | GRHS: "More 1-on-1 time with counselors — check in every quarter." Bigfork: "Make support services normalized." | Both |
| **Standardize Grading & Policies**<br>Consistent scales, missing-work rules | "General grading scale as opposed to teachers choosing their own… standardized missing work policy… more administration transparency." | GRHS only |

| Action Priority | Student Directive | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Fix & Fund Facilities and Resources**<br>Repair, fund classrooms, equip programs | "Broken things NEED to be fixed right away… bigger budgets to every class… lab, art, sports, curriculum." | Bigfork only |

## Shared & Distinct Priorities — Venn Diagram Summary

The table below maps where the two schools converged and where their distinct concerns diverge. Blue = shared by both; light blue = GRHS only; light green = Bigfork only.

| GRHS Only | Shared by Both Schools | Bigfork Only |
|---|---|---|
| Reduce busywork & grading pressure | **School spirit & traditions** | Equitable discipline & fairness |
| Standardize grading & missing-work policies | **Teacher passion & relationships** | Resource & facility investment |
| IB program & advanced coursework | **Hands-on & active learning** | K–12 community connection |
| Schedule flexibility & open campus | **Student recognition & awards** | Coaching stability & athletics support |
| Less standardized testing pressure | **Proactive teacher outreach & support** | Gender-equitable dress code |
| Concerns about AI in curriculum | **Mental health & counselor access** | PSEO access without guilt or budget stigma |
| | **Protect extracurricular programs** | |
| | **Life skills & career pathways** | |

## Alignment with FORWARD Community Survey Top Priorities

The April 2026 community survey identified four consistent top priorities across all three FORWARD engagement exercises. Student World Café feedback directly reinforces each of them.

| # | FORWARD Priority | Student Voice Alignment |
|---|---|---|
| **#1** | **Class Size and Staffing** | Students at both schools raised concerns about class sizes and shrinking student-to-teacher ratios. Requests for one-on-one check-ins and small-group work reflect a desire for more individualized attention. |
| **#2** | **Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention** | The single most consistent student message: passionate, caring, engaging teachers change everything. Students named specific teachers by name and asked for enthusiasm, feedback, and proactive support as non-negotiables. |
| **#3** | **Student Support Services (Esp. Mental Health)** | Both schools independently raised mental health as a concern. Students called for normalized support services, quarterly counselor check-ins, and teachers trained to notice students who are struggling silently. |
| **#4** | **Maintaining Financial Stability & Operating Costs** | Bigfork students expressed direct awareness of budget pressures — broken equipment unfixed, labs unused, teachers spending personal funds. Students asked for transparent, equitable resource allocation across programs. |

*Blue rows = Top 4 priorities, consistent across all three FORWARD engagement exercises. Student feedback reinforces all four.*

## Key Recommendations from Students

Seven recommendations emerged directly from student responses. The first five were raised independently at both GRHS and Bigfork — a strong cross-district signal of priority.

| # | Recommendation | Description | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Shift from compliance to deep learning** | Replace check-the-box assignments with fewer, richer tasks — discussion-based, project-based, or inquiry-driven — with meaningful feedback and time to reach genuine understanding. | Both |
| 2 | **Strengthen teacher-student relationships & proactive support** | Teachers should reach out to struggling students before students have to ask. Implement structured check-ins and ensure counselors meet with every student each semester. | Both |
| 3 | **Expand hands-on, life skills & career-relevant learning** | Reinstate or expand home economics, financial literacy, shop, and career exploration. Students want learning that connects to real life — not just college prep or screen-based work. | Both |
| 4 | **Protect and invest in extracurricular programs** | Arts, athletics, music, and student activities are the foundation of school identity and belonging. Students at both schools asked the board to protect these from further erosion. | Both |
| 5 | **Normalize mental health support and reduce stigma** | Make counselor access routine and destigmatized. Adults in the building should be trained to notice and reach out to students who are struggling before those students have to self-identify. | Both |
| 6 | **Standardize grading, assessment & discipline policies** | GRHS students requested consistent grading scales and missing-work policies across classrooms. Bigfork students asked for fair, gender-neutral discipline applied consistently for all students. | GRHS only |
| 7 | **Address resource gaps & invest in the physical environment** | Bigfork students asked for broken equipment to be fixed immediately, labs to be funded, and facilities made accessible. GRHS students requested updated technology, flexible seating, and a functional library. | Bigfork only |

## CONCLUSION

These results reflect a clear, unified message from district students: they want to be known, challenged, and supported — by passionate teachers, in well-resourced schools, with meaningful learning experiences that connect to their futures. The four priorities identified across all FORWARD engagement exercises are directly and powerfully reinforced by student voice. Student feedback is not a footnote to the FORWARD process — it is confirmation that the community's top priorities are the students' top priorities too.

## NEXT STEPS

- Incorporate student World Café findings into FORWARD Focus Area final recommendations
- Present student voice report alongside community survey results to the Grand Rapids Area Schools Board of Education
- Guide long-term, cost-effective planning that centers student experience and well-being
- Expand future student engagement beyond the current 2% representation in community surveys



Grand Rapids Area Schools

# FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

School leaders spent a full year talking with the community to understand what people cared about and to rebuild trust. The FORWARD process was built to be real, not just for show. Community input shaping the future of our schools.

## Who was involved? Hundreds of People.

- A true cross-section of the community - in role, perspective, and geography
  - Two community surveys
- FORWARD  Advisory Committee (4 Mtgs.)
- Staff & Student Feedback Meetings



## The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

The FORWARD Community Advisory Committee met four times, December, 2025 - April, 2026.

A separate Staff feedback session was held in March 2026. And two Student Feedback session were held May, 2026.

The process made a special effort to include voices from Bigfork and Cohasset. These residents raised concerns about students not having the same access to courses and resources as Grand Rapids students.

- ***December**, committee members learned about the district — its size, its budget, and its students.*
- ***January**, they dug into school finance and learned that while revenue grew over the past decade, spending had started to outpace it, leading to nearly $9.8 million in cuts and the loss of about 85 staff positions.*
- ***March**, a hands-on budget exercise helped members understand firsthand why the district's financial decisions are so difficult.*
- ***April**, the committee wrapped up by identifying their top priorities and preparing to share*

# FORWARD Community Advisory Committee

The most important finding was how much people agreed — across surveys, meetings, and staff and student feedback sessions — on the same priorities.

## What the Community Said... Focus Areas (Priorities) for Future Consideration:

1. Class Size and Staffing
2. Instructional Quality & Teacher Retention
3. Student Support Services, Especially Mental Health
4. Financial Stability & Operating Costs
5. Expanded Student Opportunities



## How do we move FORWARD?

While some of the identified items may be able to be added with a reallocation of current resources, many will require additional funding. When and how to do so will require extensive discussion by the school board and possibly additional data.

## What Stakeholders Want the School Board to Know

The same ideas came up throughout the FORWARD process:

- Students need to come first in every decision.
- Teachers are working many unpaid hours each week and are burning out.
- Mental health support is only reaching students in crisis — many others are struggling quietly.
- Students in Bigfork and Cohasset don't have the same opportunities as students in Grand Rapids, and that isn't fair.
- The community wants honest communication, even when the news is hard.

## *The community is ready to move forward together!*

*The message is clear: smaller class sizes, quality instruction and supported teachers, real mental health services for students, financial stability, and expanded (and equitable) student opportunities — all with continued community involvement, transparency, and communication.*