

## **Same Plan, Different Package. A quoted history of consolidation and school closure plans for the Helena School District.**

IR 4-8-12

**In the past five years in Stevensville, he's overseen the narrow passage of an \$8.8 million bond and the subsequent construction of two school facilities that now house fourth through eighth grades and a music center. However, that didn't come without some resistance, since it meant demolishing the old, historic school and taking out some trees for parking.**

**He also had to cut staff at the administrative level and most recently cut a teacher to balance the budget.**

IR 8-29-12

The bottom line, Tintinger said, is that **building a new space will mean consolidating existing space since there is not a growing enrollment**, and using the existing buildings is best.

IR 9-27-12

If the district expands Jim Darcy Elementary to meet the needs in its areas, fewer students would attend the downtown schools. Central, Hawthorne and Broadwater Schools would lose a total of 187 students. They would be filled to just 71 percent of their capacity, on average, if only students from their areas attended. Jefferson and Smith, after renovations, could accommodate that population, Downhour said. **Without such consolidations, the ripple effect of the Jim Darcy expansions would make the populations untenable.**

**"Can we operate a school with 130 students in it?" he asked. "The answer is no, we can't do it**

IR 1-8-13

Because 100 percent the district's \$53 million general fund – the money used to pay for operational costs – is already being spent, the **next step in the planning process is to complete an operational plan for the district that outlines proposals for how to staff and operate any new improvements, expansions or facilities within the district**, Kultgen said.

Once a bond is passed, engineers and architects will be selected and construction can begin – which should only take about 15 months for a new elementary school, Kultgen said.

"I don't want to put myself behind any rocks, but this will be done in the coming year – easy," he said. "I think. **I've been through this process once before – it is tough, but boy is it rewarding.**"

IR 5-1-13

**"I do believe we have to look at (school) boundaries,"** he told the board. "It will bring up a lot of emotions and a lot of feelings. This is something that we're going to have to address as a board."

He said that it is important that school boundaries being changed be done with transparency and very close involvement from the community since doing so is such a sensitive issue.

Kultgen said through all of the Educational Planning process, the challenge is that new construction can be paid for through a bond, but the district is using 100 percent of the operational budget allowed by state law, which will make staffing and paying for day-to-day operations of any expansions a challenge — a challenge the board must take on and one that he said he feels can be overcome.

IR 10-18-13

Kultgen pointed to Bryant school as an example of building investments being carefully weighed.

"We want to maintain a great learning environment over there, but how much money do you put into Bryant, because we know that 6,000 feet is a windowless basement," he said.

According to data published by the district, Bryant received around \$20,000 from the building reserve fund over the past seven years, plus money spent on upgrades that affected all schools. Bryant also received ADA accessibility upgrades as part of a million-dollar grant for several buildings.

IR 11-20-2013

Kultgen emphasized that all projects should be developed with students' educational needs as the top priority. He asked attendees to consider that a foundation for their decision-making as well.

He said the rationale for whatever projects are chosen must be obvious to voters — they should not have to be convinced of its importance.

**One thing that's not up for consideration? Closing an elementary school.**

**Kultgen said the district doesn't have enough information to justify any closures in the near future.**

**"Let's quit talking about closing a school," he said. "Let's keep that off the table."**

IR 1-31-2014

Central School drew the most scrutiny, as the proposal seeks to double the school's current size so it can hold — as with Jim Darcy and Warren — around 500 students.

The proposal to expand a school with around 240 students, which itself was considered for permanent closure less than two years ago, put pressure on one of the district's inevitable decisions: closing and consolidating schools.

**The district must close one or more facilities before addressing the overcrowding situation at C.R. Anderson, the state's largest middle school, Kultgen said, because opening a new school would push annual operating costs above the state-mandated maximum.**

Kultgen and the steering committee thus decided to tackle the facilities question in steps, beginning by getting students back to their neighborhood schools.

**Then, he said, the school board will have to devise an "objective" procedure for closing schools by identifying enrollment counts that trigger a closure.**

"I think we have to be transparent to our public," Kultgen said in presenting the proposal. **"There's going to come a time when we have to consolidate our schools."**

In her remarks, chair Libby Goldes argued that every facilities decision must be made with student achievement as the final priority.

"Are we going to have 11 elementary schools or are we going to provide the resources students need?" she said.

She said the district's current buildings do not provide an adequate learning environment for students.

"We have not done right by our children," she said.

"I hesitate to think about putting this off," Goldes added.

"We've made some good gains tonight," Kultgen said. **"Just making 'consolidation' come out without stuttering is good."**

Kultgen said after the meeting that he plans to provide the board on Feb. 10 with a "matrix" outlining data on enrollment, population area and lot size for each of the district's 11 elementary schools. He said **he doesn't plan to name a short-list of schools being considered for closure.**

**"I will not name a school without talking to that community," he said.**

“I had hoped we would be able to make a decision tonight,” Goldes said just before trustees’ vote. “However, we have to be responsive to our community.”

IR – 2-10-14

**Kultgen has also made clear that talk of specific closures could jeopardize the bond. In steering committee meetings, he called campaigning for a bond while closing a school a “win-lose” situation that voters won’t support.**

“It brings up that fear of losing your neighborhood school,” he said last week.

Kultgen has said the school may not be filled the day it reopens, but also said the expansion opens up new options for the future. **He said spending millions to renovate Central to its current size would not make financial sense.**

IR 3-20-14

In his remarks on the district’s academic vision, **Upham said the Helena schools** have been deficient in certain academic resources for many years. He didn’t beat around the bush in noting the implication of his comments.

**“To get resources into the buildings to students, we’re going to have to consolidate,” he said.**

Upham specifically referred to the drawbacks of having specialized teachers work across multiple small schools, saying that the model is inefficient.

**“If we want newer schools, we’re going to need fewer schools,” he said.**

**“When you start talking about school closures, that’s a whole other issue in itself. But we’re here. To run from it would be cowardly,” Upham said.**

**But limited operational funds and enrollment that’s projected to remain flat prohibits the district from just building its way out of overcrowding.**

**“This is what makes our situation so complex,” Kultgen said. “If you want to build another new school, what do you have to do? Take another one off.”**

He said Helena’s 11 elementary schools have been sustained “on the backs” of middle school enrollments.

IR 5-1-14

**The \$45 million proposal called for expansions to Jim Darcy, Warren and Central schools** as well as a computer lab for every other school. Subsequent bonds would address middle and high school buildings, according to the plan.

**Some small schools would need to be consolidated before the district could afford to operate additional facilities such as a new middle school, Superintendent Kent Kultgen said at the time.** However, he argued that the information required to decide which schools should close wouldn’t be available for several years.

“I don’t know that this group can write a recommendation,” facilitator Cindy Lewis said, “but there is certain information that can be passed on.”

The transition from the work group back to the school board would take the form of a joint meeting with both entities, officials have said. The meeting will be facilitated by Kultgen, he said Wednesday, in which he will present “an expanded plan of a bond presentation” **that will include concrete consolidation scenarios.**

The more detailed options will be based upon ideas raised by the work group, he said.

**“This group gave some great trends of where we’re going. This group really opened the door to the discussion of consolidation of schools,” he said. “They gave permission to turn this into a community discussion.”**

The meeting will be take place on Wednesday, May 7 at 6 p.m., Kultgen said.

IR 5-8-14

**Hawthorne, Bryant and Jefferson Elementary Schools would close, with boundaries for the remaining elementary schools redrafted to more evenly distribute students, under an elementary school bond proposal brought before the school board by Helena School District Superintendent Kent Kultgen.**

**Redrawing boundaries would even out student enrollment between 420 and 461 for the remaining schools, except for Broadwater, which would enroll 341 under Kultgen’s plan.**

**Kultgen proposed shifting all elementary schools, with the exception of Broadwater, to a 4-3 structure, with four classes of up to 20 students for kindergarten through second grade, three classes of up to 28 for third and fourth grades, and up to 30 students for three classes of fifth grade. Four Georgians and Rossiter already use the 4-3 structure.**

**Consolidation would also balance the economic diversity of the students, Kultgen said.**

The percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch under the Title 1 program varies across schools, with 22 percent eligible in Jim Darcy up to 100 percent qualifying at Bryant.

“What we’re concerned about is that students at title schools need more help, and what’s going to happen if we close Bryant?” Kultgen said. “It will diversify economic levels of kids in all classes.”

*The discussion of what to do with middle schools would come after consolidation of elementary schools, but Kultgen said he has shifted course from supporting the construction of a third middle school in the district in favor of redrawing boundaries to even out enrollment between C.R. Anderson and Helena Middle School. The savings generated by consolidating elementary schools would be entirely eaten up in operating costs for a new middle school, and he would rather see that money go towards academic needs in the elementary schools, he said.*

**The proposal comes on the heels of the Helena elementary bond working group’s failure to reach a consensus on recommendations for the district. The lack of specific numbers on operating costs, savings and benefits to closure and consolidation were a major reason some working group members cited for their inability to reach a consensus.**

**Kultgen praised the efforts of the working group in pushing the discussions over school closures and boundary changes forward.**

**Kultgen said in an interview he resisted bringing forward a plan with specific school closures until now because he wanted the decisions to be community-based rather than unilateral, but that people in the community just want a plan to consider.**

**“This is a proposal I can stand behind,” he said.**

IR 5-29-14

Helena school board trustees found some consensus Wednesday during the second of what will be weekly meetings to agree upon a K-8 bond proposal, but agreement wasn’t on neighborhood elementary schools.

Instead, trustees took up the issue of middle school overcrowding, which has been identified in planning reports as a chief problem and **named as one reason to consolidate elementary schools.**

The problem, they agreed, may best be addressed by leveling enrollment between the two middle schools, rather than other options such as constructing a third facility or expanding another school from K-5 to K-8.

Creating two 850-student middle schools may provide a more financially feasible solution with potential academic benefits, trustees said.

**HMS could accommodate the additional students, Principal Josh McKay said, but presented a list of facilities upgrades the school needs.**

**Adjusting enrollment zones for middle schools would have ramifications for high school enrollments and cross-town allegiances, Assistant Superintendent Greg Upham said.**

IR 6-5-14

After an hour of discussion during the board's third meeting dedicated to the topic, trustees asked Superintendent Kent Kultgen to bring financial details for a bond proposal that would include the following projects:

- Expansion of Jim Darcy and Warren schools to hold 500 students each;
- Modular computer labs and technology upgrades for all K-8 schools;
- Substantial renovations to Helena Middle School to update the facility and possibly accommodate around 150 students who currently attend the larger C.R. Anderson Middle School; and
- **Consolidation of Central and Bryant schools into one facility, at a location not yet determined.**

Trustees did not reach specific agreement on each of the projects, but the new shortlist provides a clearer indication of the scope of what voters might be asked to approve this fall.

**The latest direction is reminiscent of the first proposal put forth in January**, which would have expanded Jim Darcy, Warren and Central and added computer labs to every school. But where the earlier plan would have doubled the size of Central without deciding which students would attend it, **Wednesday's discussion identified the district's smallest school, Bryant, as a consolidation partner.**

The first phase could be completed without additional school closures, such as those Kultgen proposed to Hawthorne and Jefferson in May, **though trustees did not rule out consolidation from future bond proposals.**

"I like where we're going as far as taking incremental steps," trustee Libbi Lovshin said. "It also gives us the opportunity to try to get the information out to the public in a way that seems less frantic or changing."

**"I think consolidation of schools is out on the horizon," Kultgen said. "I think it has to come from rich discussion with the community."**

IR 6-26-14

After a meeting in which trustees were accused by some residents of shunning years of public input, fracturing the community and engaging in woeful ignorance and deceit, they voted 7-0 to call for a bond election by mail ballot on Oct. 7.

In doing so, **trustees decided that Bryant Elementary should close and its students dispersed**; Central Elementary and Jim Darcy Elementary should be razed and rebuilt at their respective downtown and North Valley sites; Warren Elementary should be expanded to hold up to 500 students; and modular computer labs should be installed at every K-8 school.

The plan will cost roughly \$48 million, based upon most recent district estimates.

If approved, the proposal would eliminate the need to bus students into the city from valley areas and provide several extra classrooms; it would leave the Sixth Ward without an elementary school, while de-concentrating student poverty rates to an unknown degree; it would tear down the current Central School building, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the adjacent Seventh Avenue Gym; it would delay changes to middle schools until a later planning phase; and it would make sure every school has at least one computer lab.

**Bryant students would not all be relocated to the new Central school, officials said. Instead, attendance boundaries among the remaining east side city schools would be adjusted to better balance enrollment and socioeconomic status.**

The proposal to close Bryant and double the size of Central runs counter to the wishes of most residents who have repeatedly expressed a desire to keep their neighborhood schools, resident Beau Downing said. Trustees have ignored the findings of a \$250,000 public planning process, Downing said, referring to the 2012 report led by Mosaic Architecture.

**We're flip-flopping because we're listening," Prezeau said. "I think maybe the community needs to listen to us."**

"We're not out there to ruin neighborhoods or tear apart the community. What we're trying to do is make spaces that are functional for our kids and that work," she said.

"We are trying our absolute best to do the absolute best for our kids," Prezeau added.

IR 7-15-14

**The Helena School Board on Tuesday voted to cancel the bond proposal it approved June 25** as the Helena City Commission considers whether to allow the demolition of Central Elementary School and Seventh Avenue Gymnasium on the same site.

IR 9-11-14

**Throughout the meeting members tossed around the idea of making the Smith Elementary campus a 500 student school and redrawing boundaries for Bryant and Jefferson Elementaries to shift students to the Smith campus. They also considered making C.R. Anderson an elementary school again and building a new middle school elsewhere.**

**Lovshin said that no matter what, the 11 elementary schools currently serving the district are too many. Some are going to have to be closed.**

IR 9-19-14

**Myhre laid out her goal for a school district with two high schools, two middle schools and eight elementary schools — four to feed students into each middle school.**

**Under that model the committee decided Warren and Smith could both become 500 student schools that feed into Helena Middle, then Helena High schools.**

**Jim Darcy and Rossiter would be 500 student schools on the other side of town to feed into C.R. Anderson Middle and then Capital High schools.**

**The decision on which schools would close would be made on a case-by-case basis.**

Elementary schools weren't the only ones the committee discussed.

Members also tossed around ideas of repurposing Helena Middle School and rebuilding Helena High School on ground that is more conducive for a school facility.

**To finish the meeting, Assistant Superintendent Greg Upham stressed the need to consider the future.**

**He likened the district's current situation to a cliff. In 2014, 93 percent of the district's money is going toward salary and another 3 percent is going into facility maintenance. If things don't change, those fixed costs will continue to rise as the facilities continue in disrepair. By 2035, he tossed out the potential of the fixed cost rising to 98 percent.**

IR 10-1-14

One of the three main goals of the facility committee is to create a successful bond. During its first three meetings the committee determined some points it thinks will help meet that goal, though there is still nothing set in stone.

**The committee is giving a hard look at rebuilding Jim Darcy and Warren to 500-student schools, expanding Smith to a 500-student school, purchasing land for future building or expansion, possibly expanding Jefferson to be a 350-student school and redrawing the boundary for Central Elementary so those students are distributed between Hawthorne, Jefferson, Bryant and possibly Smith.**

**"If you pass, say step one of the bond, in whose hands is the power to order a school closed?" Jon Rush asked.**

**Superintendent Kent Kultgen replied that the power rests with the board of trustees. There is protocol the board would have to follow before closing a school.**

**Trustee Myhre suggested the committee determine a set of criteria, including school enrollment and facility cost, to test each school by in the future to determine if a campus should be closed.**

IR 10-21-14

**Myhre proposed renovating Helena Middle School into an elementary school that could house Bryant and Central students, then finding a new site for Helena Middle School.**

The downfall of including middle and high schools in a bond plan is that would take more time to plan for and more time to build, both Kultgen and committee chair Terry Beaver said.

Kultgen proposed an alternative solution for students on Helena's east side — an area that is home to about 900 elementary-aged students.

**Jefferson, he said, could be expanded to a 350-student school. Smith would be turned into a 4:3 school with a capacity of 500 students after boundaries are redrawn. He proposed putting that on the first bond phase, which would solve some elementary student problems and give the school board more time to discuss middle and high school solutions.**

**Under that plan, Bryant school would remain open during the first bond phase while students living in its boundary and in Central's boundary shift to Jefferson and Smith.**

IR 12-9-14

As a board we believe the K-12 facility vision is a good foundation to a solution for providing an optimal education to all students," Chair Libby Goldes read from a prepared statement at the Tuesday meeting.

**The vision was developed by the facility committee after numerous meetings, extensive searching for public input and one community workshop since the committee's inception in September. The vision looks at all the district's buildings and includes plans to build two new high schools, renovate the existing high schools into middle schools and renovate the middle schools into elementary schools. It also includes plans for a new Jim Darcy, a new or renovated Smith Elementary, technology upgrades at all schools and several other tasks.**

IR 1-6-15

The proposal for the first bond election includes a new Jim Darcy, renovations at Broadwater, Kessler, Hawthorne and Bryant, plus additions and renovations at Rossiter, Smith, Jefferson, Warren and Four Georgians. Kultgen proposed two options for students in Central Elementary boundaries, either modular classrooms on the Central campus or renovations to the Lincoln campus.

The overall vision calls for two new high schools, the existing high schools renovated into middle schools and the middle schools renovated into elementary schools. Redrawn boundaries for Kessler, Hawthorne, Central and Bryant Elementary schools would be consolidated into the renovated middle schools.

Trustee Terry Beaver disagreed, saying that modular classrooms are more educationally sound than some of the rooms in existing buildings.

The principals of Jim Darcy Elementary and Central-Linc Elementary were in attendance. Both schools have modular classrooms now to accommodate student numbers, and Beaver asked them to address the adequacy of those modular classrooms.

"I would not argue, I know for a fact that my student achievement is higher than adequate, it's better than adequate in my exterior classrooms. For some reason this word modular has taken on a real negative connotation. I don't know why, I just know it has," Brian Cummings, principal of Jim Darcy, said.

He added that the mood, wiring and technology in those rooms are all great.

“I can’t argue enough or convince you enough, they’re great exterior classrooms,” Cummings said.

Central-Line Principal Vanessa Nasset said she echoed much of what Cummings said, with a few caveats. She said it would be important to have good lighting in modular classrooms, and they would all need to be connected so students could walk between classes without going outside.

Trustee Libbi Lovshin expressed hesitation at holding onto the proposal for another meeting.

**“I think I could be ready. Part of the issue is that, I’m getting to the point where I’m kind of tired of talking about it and I think I’ve heard from our community that they’re tired of talking about it too and they’re ready for us to take some action. ... I’m not willing to wait very much longer,”** Lovshin said.

IR 1-20-15

The full board will hear two distinct bond packages. One very similar to the proposal put forward at the Jan. 6 meeting that includes a new Jim Darcy, renovations at Broadwater, Kessler, Hawthorne and Bryant, plus additions and renovations at Rossiter, Smith, Jefferson, Warren and Four Georgians. Different is that the proposal will now include three options for Central School: No longer using the building and distributing the student population to other schools, moving the population of Central students to the Ray Bjork Learning Center with the modular classrooms from the Lincoln campus or spending \$7.8 million to seismically upgrade and retrofit Central.

Under all those options, the vision to build two new high schools, renovate the existing high schools into middle schools and consolidate elementary schools into the middle schools would stay intact.

The committee also renewed the idea to build a 4:3 school with enough capacity for 450 to 500 students at the Central campus. The expense and long-term implications of that project resulted in the Facility Committee asking Superintendent Kent Kultgen to develop a new second bond proposal.

IR 2-18-15

Details of the renovations to the 10 other schools have not been ironed out by district officials, but it will look similar to a previous proposal that included a new Jim Darcy, mostly new Smith, renovations at Broadwater, Kessler, Hawthorne and Bryant, plus additions and renovations at Rossiter, Jefferson, Warren and Four Georgians.

The proposal received mixed community support, with some people applauding the board’s decision to touch all elementary schools but holding reservations about future consolidation.

Beaver remained adamant that investing millions into the nearly 100-year-old Central school building was not “fiscally responsible.”

He said the building had failed, renovating it in an adequate fashion was not possible due to its age, and it would set a bad precedent for spending millions on the next school that failed.

Plus, he said investing that much into a building **did not mesh with the board’s long-term goal of consolidating schools.**

**“We are attempting to keep too many buildings open, and it’s at the expense of kids,”** Beaver said.

The district’s current facility vision includes a bond election in about three years that would finance construction of two new high schools. **Then, around 2021, another elementary bond would finance the renovation of the existing high schools to house middle school students and the middle schools to house elementary students.**

IR 2-19-15

*The elementary bond election approved by the Helena School Board of Trustees Wednesday night could solve problems with aging infrastructure and student displacement, but would not save operational expenses that could be reinvested in educational resources as hoped.*

“It won’t be until later bonds that we can really start reaping the resources that we would like to see, but that’s another discussion down the road,” Superintendent Kent Kulgen said.



Original plans for the bond would expand student capacity at most schools to give the elementary district a capacity of 4,322 students. The elementary student population in October 2013 was 3,464.

Trustee Betsy Baur, one of the two board members who voted against the bond, said those operational costs factored into her dissenting vote.

“I think it’s going to create incredible financial hardships on the district,” she said.

Kultgen said facility improvements made through this bond would increase utility efficiency. Because the bond’s final details are not ironed out, he said, it’s too early to say whether increased efficiency will counteract the cost of maintaining extra space.

**“For the first couple years you’re building bigger than you’ll need,” but it relies on school consolidation in the future, Kultgen said.**

### **IR 3-10-15**

To meet the \$70 million, Kultgen worked with contractors to shave about \$9 million off the February proposal.

The bond still includes a new Jim Darcy, new Smith, extensively renovated Central and construction touching all other elementary schools. It downsized the new Smith by 5,000 square feet to have a capacity of 400 students, instead of 500. It also downsized the expansion at Rossiter by 4,500 sq. ft. to 13,500 sq. ft. and cut the construction at Four Georgians in half to 3,300 sq. ft. of new space.

Kultgen said those changes saved about \$4 million and will not have an adverse impact on facility space for students.

Despite these cuts the bond still would add significantly to the district’s total square feet of educational space, a notion of overbuilding that has received dissent among the board and community.

***The newest bond also scratched \$5.5 million in deferred maintenance.*** Those projects will now be covered by funds in the elementary building reserve levy -- a \$1.25 million per-year fund paid for by voters that continues into 2023.

Had the bond covered that maintenance, the board was planning to use the building reserve levy to upgrade technology in Helena’s two middle schools. Kultgen said this change will not affect that decision because there will still be \$4.5 million excess of building reserve funds, which he said is enough to cover the planned tech upgrades.

Kultgen said he’s confident voters will approve this bond because “the need is known.”

“I’m not saying it’s a popular bond ... but I believe the community knows the needs that are out there,” he said.

Trustee Cherche Prezeau asked if the process was on track with the timeline so far, and Kultgen responded that several individuals who had initially stated they would support a bond once one was approved had stepped down. The superintendent said one supporter stated he would have liked to see a community survey done before the bond was finalized.

Trustee Ellen Feaver said she didn’t support sending out a poll, saying instead efforts should be focused on educating the community on the bond details as to eliminate misconceptions.

Prezeau seconded Feaver, saying she thought the community had plenty of time to comment on the bond during the last several years of development.

**“I feel as though we’ve spent a great deal of time changing our bond to reflect what we’ve heard from the community,”** she said.

If the bond doesn’t pass, Kultgen said the district will step back, develop a new bond and try again.

### **IR 3-24-15**

Baur was one of the two dissenting votes during the February trustee meeting that established the details of the bond. She said she voted against the official bond language “because I don’t feel like the fiscal ramifications have been fully worked out as the bond has been proposed.”

She has previously expressed concerns that this bond would expand capacity in the district and would not save operational funds, which was one of the initial purposes of passing a facility bond.

**She again stated on Tuesday she doesn't like that the bond only touches K-5 elementary schools and does not address middle school repairs. She also expressed concern that the district would not have enough bonding capacity in several years to carry out the third phase of the district's vision, which includes closing or repurposing Bryant, Central, Kessler and Hawthorne and using the two existing middle schools as elementary schools.**