



# Decatur Public Schools

*Educating for Success*

**BOLD:** Building better Opportunities for Learning in Decatur

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

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### **Why are district leaders recommending combining schools with some school closures?**

The Board of Education, in conjunction with District leaders, believe it is time to address our oldest and aging facilities to allow DPS#61 to invest our resources and support programs that will better serve our students. Based on the last demographic study of Decatur performed by *Business Information Services, LLC*, district enrollment is projected and will continue to decline over the next five years. To address building utilization, magnet school waitlists, and other capacity issues, the recommendation to combine and close schools will allow us to provide all of our students with an equitable learning experience no matter where they live and create a more sustainable future for District #61.

### **Why would we combine/close elementary schools?**

DPS#61 currently has twenty-two buildings serving under 9,000 students, essentially, spreading our resources thinly across the entire district. This means students in our district don't have access to the same services because we are sharing social workers, art and music teachers among our buildings to name a few. In a study of Illinois school districts with similar student enrollment as Decatur, DPS has nearly double the number of buildings.

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## **Won't class sizes increase in the remaining schools if buildings are closed?**

One of the challenges we face when operating schools of various sizes, is the ability to balance class sizes district-wide. By closing elementary schools and using Health Life Safety funds to build additions to current buildings, it will allow the district to consistently fall within the current staffing ratios, and limit the number of classrooms below or above our ideal class sizes. At the completion of the BOLD plan, class sizes will remain very similar to what it is today.

## **Won't closing schools make our remaining schools overcrowded?**

Many people incorrectly assume closing schools would leave the remaining schools overcrowded. The District has buildings that are being underutilized where learning spaces are not being used, while schools with magnet programs have waitlists.

For example, Stephen Decatur Middle School has a building capacity of 1100 and is currently serving less than 400 students. By combining TJMS with SDMS at Stephen Decatur, it will allow our Thomas Jefferson facility to house a larger Montessori program which currently has a waitlist. Some buildings will have more room than others, which is why boundaries will also be adjusted to better balance enrollment across the district. We are also building additions to the remaining elementary schools to increase space which will allow us to incorporate 21st-century learning environments in those schools.

## **Will the residents of Decatur have to pay an increase in property taxes to pay for the BOLD facility plan?**

The district will submit Health Life Safety documents to ISBE (Illinois State Board of Education) to take Johns Hill and Durfee buildings offline, two of the district's oldest facilities, using the Building Replacement process.\* Illinois Statute allows school districts to use funds from this process to replace a school building or build additions to replace

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portions of a building when it is determined that the recommendations for the existing building(s) will cost more than the replacements costs. A new building or additions shall be equivalent in the area (square feet) and comparable in purpose and grades served and may be on the same site or another site. Hope Academy was a result of this similar building replacement process.

The Board intends to issue bonds that are supported by local property taxes. Annually, the Board will determine how much of the tax burden they want to offset with operational funds. The funding the District estimates to receive from the Health Life Safety process will pay for approximately \$30 million of the BOLD facilities plan. The Board of Education has charged district leaders with finding operational dollars to assist in the debt service payment.

*\*Any building replacement(s) may only be done upon the order of the Regional Superintendent of Schools and the approval of the State Superintendent of Education.*

## **Will the district have any pod or boundary changes resulting from the recommended facility plan?**

While the pod concept was established over twenty years ago and changes in boundaries may mitigate issues with classroom sizes in the buildings, a boundary committee has been formed to research and provide solutions to address the implications of combining and closing schools in the district. It is likely that pod and boundary changes will need to be implemented as a result of the BOLD plan.

## **Won't staff and teachers lose their jobs with this proposal?**

As students move to the remaining schools, staff will follow our students. Keep in mind; however, the final phase will not conclude until the start of the 2020 school year. If there are additional impacts on support staff within the next couple of years, some of those will be absorbed through retirements and other resignations that occur on an ongoing basis.

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## **Do we have to close schools?**

The District considered many options before landing on the BOLD plan . The district is now able to make upgrades at nearly every building in the district, including the installation of air-conditioning to those that don't have it. If we did not reduce building inventory, the district would not be able to install A/C.

Closing schools can potentially provide the district a savings of over \$1million dollars a year. The District has recognized the number of heat-related early dismissals and heard from the community that our buildings need air conditioning. Considering the work performed by the demographer indicating the district is projected a decline in enrollment over the next five years.

The majority of our available resources is spent on staffing our schools, making up 85 percent of the budget. Operations and learning is the remaining 15 percent. Without considering operational reductions, specifically the closing of buildings, there is very little left to cut that doesn't directly impact our students in the classroom.

## **What are the benefits of the BOLD plan for our students?**

DPS#61 would best serve all students when our schools are operating at optimal building capacity while ensuring our classrooms have equitable support no matter where they live. This would create a more sustainable financial future. With the BOLD facility plan, ALL students will get:

- Improved access to support services
- More equitable learning experiences
- A student-centered middle school experience
- More balanced class sizes across the district
- Long-term stability for staffing, operations, and learning
- Evaluation of the pod system and lessening its impact on our families
- Create additional capacity at some of our most popular programs

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## What is the timeline for the facility plan?

Below is the projected timeline of the recommended four-year BOLD facility plan:

**August 2019** **SDMS has combined with TJ** to host one middle school campus  
**Harris Elementary** combined with **Hope Academy**  
More comprehensive **K-12 Alternative School** and **SEAP** relocate to **Harris**.  
Air conditioning installed at **Enterprise** and **Pershing** schools.

**August 2020** **Enterprise & Garfield** Montessori schools combined and move to a renovated Thomas Jefferson  
Construction to **South Shores** addition + air conditioning  
**French STEM Academy** moves to Enterprise  
**Dennis** K-8 absorbs Mary K. French building making Dennis a two-facility school.  
Durfee projected to close (tentative: based on construction timelines)

**August 2021** New **Johns Hill** building opens old Johns Hill taken offline  
**South Shores** addition complete with air conditioning  
Combine **Muffley** and **Baum** at **Muffley** campus + air conditioning  
Combine **Franklin** and **Oak Grove** at **Franklin** campus + air conditioning  
Combine **Parsons** and **Stevenson** at **Parsons** campus + air conditioning

***The following buildings will be tentatively closed and/or repurposed:***

Garfield, SEAP/Southeast, Stevenson, Baum, Durfee, old Johns Hill, and Oak Grove.

## Will there be a process in place for families and students to visit their new elementary schools?

Yes. A planned event to welcome new families to new elementary schools will be organized and announced. We encourage families to take advantage of annual Open Houses to visit and get to know building administrators and staff. Families are always welcome to schedule a visit to any of our schools by calling the school office.