
2017 Operating Levy and Bond Referendum Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Updated 11/03/2017

Operating Levy FAQ

Q. Why is the District asking to renew the operating levy now when it doesn't expire until 2022?

When the Board of Education decided to bring a bond election to voters, it also decided it was important to ask for an extended and expanded operating levy at the same time. The District wants to be transparent with the community about its long-term funding needs at the same time it requests the authority to sell \$109 million in bonds to implement the Master Facilities Plan. It seems to be responsible to ask voters at the same time as the bond election for the funding needed to create long-term financial sustainability.

Q. Why does the District rely so much on its operating levy?

The Northfield community has a high level of expectation for programming offered in its schools. In order to provide the high quality educational experience Northfield is proud of, the District relies on operating levy dollars to fill in the gaps resulting from decades of legislative underfunding. The District's operating levy is responsible for 11% of its revenue -- approximately \$5.4 million. If the Minnesota legislature had provided schools with simple inflationary increases to the per pupil basic funding formula over the last 30 years, Northfield Public Schools would not need the same amount to sustain programming.

Q. What do operating levy funds pay for?

Operating levy funds can pay for any expenditure in the School District. Since schools are "people" institutions, operating levy funds most often are used to pay salaries and benefits of teachers and staff.

Q. How is the operating levy different from the bond referendum?

Bond referendum funds can only be spent on building projects and cannot be spent on salaries. In short, *bonds are for buildings and levies are for learning.*

Q. How does the District compare to the State average in terms of spending on direct instruction and student support services?

Northfield Public Schools ranks 15th of 498 Minnesota school districts, charter schools, and educational cooperatives (Minnesota FY 16 Profile) in the percentage of our General Fund that is spent on direct classroom instruction and student support services (76.88%).

Q. How does the District compare to the State average in terms of the percentage of funding spent on administration?

Northfield Public Schools ranks 306th of 333 Minnesota school districts (Minnesota FY 16 Profile) in the percentage of our general fund spent on administration (7.05%).

Bond Issue FAQ

Q. Where will students go to school during construction?

Students would continue to go to their regular school buildings during the construction process. Once the the new buildings are constructed, staff and students would move into the new buildings or spaces. Proposed new spaces at the elementary schools are anticipated to open for the beginning of the 2019-20 school year. The proposed new high school is anticipated to open for the 2020-21 school year.

Q. What will happen to the Rock House?

The intent is to remove the Rock House and to move Special Education programming that takes place there into the proposed new high school. The proposed new building would be equipped with functional space for the practical life skills currently taught at the Rock House. Equipment currently stored at the Rock House would be integrated into the proposed new high school.

Q. What did we pay for the middle school? Are we still paying for it? How much longer?

The first bond for the middle school was for \$30,000,000 issued 7/1/2001. The second bond issue was for \$12,640,000 issued 3/1/2003. The second bond issue included \$2,000,000 for the middle school and the remainder was for high school projects and Memorial Field. We capitalized \$32,257,585 for the new middle school on 9/1/2004.

We refunded \$22,615,000 of the 2001 bond in 2010. This refunding bond saved taxpayers \$1,881,849. As of June 30, 2017, we owe \$14,095,000 on this bond. It will be paid off 2/1/2022.

We refunded \$9,750,000 of the 2003 bond in 2011. This refunding bond saved taxpayers \$1,224,541. As of June 30, 2017, we owe \$8,530,000 on this bond. It will be paid off 2/1/2024.

Q. Are design plans made? Will there be input from the community on design?

No design plans have been completed. While there are conceptual layouts of where new facilities and additions would be constructed on the sites, there are no design plans yet. The formal design process takes place once a bond issue has passed. There will be design committees for each project that will include staff, parents, community members, and students.

Q. Why didn't we build a high school instead of a middle school and repurpose the current high school as a middle school?

The decision to build a middle school instead of a high school took place in the early 2000s. Community input determined what the School Board brought forward to the community at the time.

Q. What will happen with Longfellow?

Longfellow School will continue to be an active building within the District. The Northfield Area Learning Center, serving approximately 60 high school students, would remain where it is currently located on the second floor of Longfellow School. District administrative offices would move into the first floor and the basement level at Longfellow. The repurposing of these two levels in the District's oldest facility for administrative space demonstrates good stewardship.

Q. What would the timeline for building projects be if the bond passes?

If the bond issue passes, the District anticipates engaging in a design phase on the projects in the following manner:

- New Northfield High School: November 2017 – July 2018
- New Elementary School: November 2017 – May 2018
- Bridgewater Elementary, Sibley Elementary, Greenvale Park Early Childhood Center renovations and additions: November 2017 – May 2018
- Longfellow School renovation: May - October 2018

The projects would then be published for bidding with construction anticipated to take place:

- New Northfield High School: September 2018 – July 2020 (Occupancy July 2020)
- New Elementary School: July 2018 – July 2019 (Occupancy July 2019)
- Bridgewater Elementary, Sibley Elementary, Greenvale Park Early Childhood Center renovations and additions: July 2018 – July 2019 (Occupancy July 2019)
- Longfellow School: March – July 2019 (Occupancy July 2019)

Q. Will the buildings be big enough for growth?

Both buildings are being constructed in a way to welcome more students than are currently served. The new elementary school provides room for up to 16% more students than currently served and the high school would allow for up to 13% more students than currently served.

Q. Why would we build if the enrollment projection is going down long range?

Northfield has not experienced large swings in enrollment. While a demographic study predicted a reduction in enrollment, the District has actually increased enrollment by approximately 100 students over the past two years.

Q. What would it cost to renovate the current high school?

This is a multi-faceted question. There are approximately \$14 million in age-related maintenance needs -- all of which are infrastructure related. One strategy considered during the Master Facilities Plan process was renovations/additions to the High School to enhance security and increase music and athletics space. These modest changes were anticipated to cost another \$12.5 million and did not address modernizing any other instructional spaces. It would not have modernized the career/technical labs (also known as vocational spaces) nor developed collaborative learning spaces.

An extensive renovation of the current high school is estimated to cost between \$38 and \$46 million to improve the building to support best practices in instruction. A renovation would only partially address security concerns because the current building's 50 exits would remain in place as emergency exits due to fire codes for a building of this configuration. In addition, a renovation of this magnitude could take up to three years and would displace students during the entire process. It would require the purchase/lease of portable classrooms at significant expense (in addition to the renovation cost) where students would attend class while parts of the building are renovated. As a portion of the building is being renovated, teachers and their students would be relocated to the portable classrooms.

Q. With mental health issues being a real and true need, why is the district wanting to spend millions of dollars on a building when what the district really needs is more student support, counselors, mental health care workers and teachers/staff?

This is the reason the District is also asking for the operating levy extension and expansion at the same time as the bond issue. Northfield Public Schools ranks 15th of 498 Minnesota school districts, charter schools, and educational cooperatives (Minnesota FY 16 Profile) in the percentage of our General Fund that is spent on direct classroom instruction and student support services (76.88%).

Northfield Public Schools continues to work on supporting the mental health of our students with a new social/emotional learning curriculum beginning in 2017-18. New facilities communicate to potential families and employees the value the community places on its schools and students.

Q. How will the bond issue impact athletic fields and gymnasium space?

If the bond issue passes, design teams (including community members, parents, staff, and students) will work on the site layout. Memorial Field will remain the same as it is now. The size of our site should allow for *at least* the same number of fields we have now. In a typical high school of the proposed size, there is usually the ability to have three full size basketball courts. Again, if the bond issue passes, design teams will have input into the actual layout and construction of the athletic facilities.

Q. How will the bond issue impact performing arts spaces?

The arts are a core part of Northfield as a community. As with any other part of the school, design teams (including community members, parents, staff, and students) will have an opportunity to provide input about the new school layout and spaces. This includes performing arts spaces.

Q. Why can't the current high school be saved and repurposed?

The School Board thoroughly reviewed several different options for the current Northfield High School building. These options included saving and repurposing all or part of the building. The tradeoff for not having to purchase land for a new building along with the need to replace athletic fields lost to the footprint of the proposed new high school necessitates the razing of the building. Consideration was given to saving the gymnasium and the auditorium. However, the significant cost of installing new HVAC and other building controls to run this preserved portion of Northfield High School and the need for the site space to replace athletic fields prompted the Board to confirm its decision to raze the existing Northfield High School. The District does prioritize repurposing buildings when practical. In the elementary project associated with the bond, repurposing the current Greenvale Park Elementary School is not only feasible, but is a significant plus.

Q. How does open enrollment impact the need for facilities and operating funds?

Open enrollment into Northfield Public Schools has an important impact on our operating funds, but a more limited impact on our need for facilities.

While the District has seen an increase in students who open enroll into Northfield Public Schools, there is still a deficit of students who “come in” vs. those who “go out” when including Northfield students who choose nonpublic, charter, or home school options.

The 2016 Enrollment Options Report shows 313 students choosing to open enroll into Northfield Public Schools. A total of 719 students chose other options. This includes 182 students choosing to open enroll into another district, 278 who chose a charter school, 146 attend a nonpublic school, and 113 students are homeschooled.

While our demographic study predicted Northfield Public Schools would see a slight decline in enrollment over the course of a decade, we have seen an increase over the past two years. While the increased enrollment has been moderate, it has provided enough additional funding to maintain programming for longer than anticipated.

Q. I hear more students are participating in early childhood education. Is this a good thing?

A higher number of pre-Kindergarten aged students are participating in early childhood programming through Early Childhood Family Education, Early Childhood Special Education, and Preschool. These larger numbers are very good for the District because economists, like former Minneapolis Federal Reserve Vice-President Art Rolnick, suggest there is a \$7 return on every \$1 investment in early childhood education. The District has more children wanting to participate in programming than space available.

Q. Has the District planned for the operational costs of adding two new schools?

Yes, the District has planned for the operational costs of adding two schools. However, the net will only be one facility because of the plan to raze the existing high school. The District would also no longer lease space for some of its early childhood programming or Community Services offices at the Northfield Community Resource Center.

Q. Is it true that Northfield High School was designed to hold a second story? Why can't we build “up?”

No, Northfield High School was not designed to hold a second story. ATS&R Architects, along with Clark Engineering, have reviewed building plans and confirmed that the building was not designed to hold a second story.