



HOWARD LAKE • WAVERLY • WINSTED

NATE WALBRUCH, SUPERINTENDENT

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Lakers,

Last year, we completed an in-depth process to create our Strategic Plan, which “birthed” our vision to be there for Every Laker, Every Day. We are proud of the efforts to include voices from across our district in gathering their experiences, and perspectives in setting a direction for our schools for the coming years.

Before Summer Dismissal, I shared information with staff relating to a proposal to realign our elementary schools into grade-level buildings. In short, the proposal would alter the structure of these buildings from PK - 4 elementaries in both towns into buildings hosting selected grade levels only. For example, Humphrey could become a K - 2 school and Winsted could become a 3 - 4 school with both sites hosting sections of PK (there could be different options for splitting the grades).

While the District’s budget situation over the previous years shed light on this realignment as a possibility, there are a number of additional reasons this proposal is being considered. I want to provide insight into thought processes and motivations surrounding this plan in an effort to give as much information as possible. Also, I join the School Board in being eager to hear the perspectives of staff, families and community members regarding this proposal. Listed below are initial reasons grade-level elementaries could be beneficial to the district:

- One part of the district's Strategic Plan centers on enhancing the capacity and skill of our teacher teams. At the elementary level, our amazing grade level teams are split between two buildings and, despite being hard-working, skilled teachers, they are unable to provide support for each other, and our students in ways deemed most effective by our profession. Organizing our school district in a way that allows these teachers to team under "one roof" allows us to take advantage of the benefits of collaboration. Many teachers that have left the district in the recent past highlighted the split between elementary schools as being difficult to manage and lacked the team support enjoyed by other districts.

- Community surveys and listening sessions last year brought attention to the difficult transition 5th grade students experience. This is, in part, due to the different classes rising 5th grade students have been attending (i.e. Humphrey and Winsted) now being one grade level, in one building, together. The lack of connections with many of their classmates, while also managing their new life at the 5-12 campus has proven difficult for many. Combining all students across a grade-level into one building throughout their Laker experience increases the community feel of our district and facilitates transitions to different buildings.
- Students, families and staff in our district deserve an equitable experience, regardless of where they live. Although our staff tries hard to provide a similar school, there are differences in practice and experiences between the schools that we can/should standardize. For students, their grade-level teams will be better-equipped to provide intervention and enrichment to students by fully using the power of their collaborative teams. Families are able to expect a guaranteed and viable curriculum with a consistent set of supports regardless of their location within the district. Also, supporting services like mental/physical health, food service and transportation can be provided more consistently to students of similar grade-level and development. Staff members experience more similar case-loads for their students. Finally, staff are able more consistently implement best practices to guarantee learning for all students.
- Disproportionate population growth across the district and space constraints in our elementary buildings will eventually require the use of attendance boundary lines. The size of our district is such that these lines may need to shift yearly to accommodate changing grade sizes, move-ins, open enrollment and more. These changing boundaries create great uncertainty, especially for families in Howard Lake where the boundary line would likely rest. Naturally, the district could provide exceptions to the boundary line; however, these exceptions are difficult to manage and generate angst and conflict.



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- Community leaders in all three towns have been clamoring for additional day-care options for residents. A move to grade-level buildings allows the district to use classroom space more efficiently at Humphrey and Winsted. Thus, we are able to open a number of classrooms in Waverly and Winsted and provide Laker Care within Waverly and Winsted.
- If a federal grant is approved, McLeod County is eager to expand their Head Start program into Winsted. As this is a federal program, there are a lot of rules and expectations surrounding the facility the program is housed in. Winsted Elementary is one of the few facilities in Winsted that would be able to meet most of the Head Start requirements. A Head Start program in Winsted provides additional support to the citizens and students of our community.
- School funding from federal, state and local sources is driven by enrollment. Each of our grade levels (generally) are around 100 students. With 25 students being a reasonable number per teacher, we have adequate funding for four (4) teachers per grade level. Until recently, HLWW has been staffing five teachers for each grade level at the elementaries. While this does drop class sizes, it reduces the amount of funding available for the rest of our operations. With the expiring of previous levies, the sunseting of COVID-era funding, and even with a new levy in place, staffing at that level is financially unsustainable.

As mentioned previously, gathering perspectives and input from stakeholders is important when considering a move such as this. This letter providing more details about the planned impact of the grade-level proposal is one step in being transparent and leveling our district to consider this change and identify additional impacts moving forward.

I have presented the proposal to a few community leaders already. A number of School Board members and I will be meeting with staff members at the elementary schools in a couple of weeks. Additionally, I will seek opportunities to connect with staff at the 5 - 12 campus. This letter serves as the first communication with all of our families. Also, I invite community members to listening sessions to be held at the following dates at 7:30pm:

- Monday, October 7th at the High School Media Center
- Wednesday, October 9th at Winsted Elementary Cafeteria
- Monday, October 21st at Humphrey Elementary Cafeteria

We are eager to continue gathering as much information about this proposal's impact as possible. We will be using the questions below to gather input and provide direction to feedback from stakeholders. As you think about this potential change, please use these questions as a way to organize your thoughts and provide useful feedback:

- What are additional benefits to this proposal?
- What are barriers to implementation?
- What are traditions/programs that should continue?
- What are traditions/programs that should be discontinued?

I look forward to working with you on furthering our understanding of this proposal and others in our path to guarantee learning for all students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nate Walbruch', with a stylized, cursive script.

Nate Walbruch

Superintendent

Howard Lake-Waverly-Winsted Schools