



Summary Report

**Community Engagement Program Evaluating Options for
School Facilities in the
Tower Grove Area**

**Presented to:
St. Louis Public Schools**

**Submitted by:
UNICOM•ARC, INC.**

October 9, 2013

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**St. Louis Public Schools
Options for School Facilities in the Tower Grove Area**

SUMMARY REPORT OF PROCESS AND FINDINGS

October 9, 2013

Introduction

The following report summarizes the process and findings of a community engagement program conducted by UNICOM•ARC for the purpose of receiving input and feedback from the Tower Grove area parents and residents (defined here as non-parents and throughout the report) regarding options for future school facilities in that area of the City. It is in response to a request from the St. Louis Public School (SLPS) District for a “consulting firm to facilitate two public meetings to share the District’s plans and assess the public will” for potential projects. As a result of the bid process UNICOM•ARC was selected to conduct the community engagement effort.

Upon being selected as the vendor for the project UNICOM•ARC representatives worked with key SLPS leaders in planning sessions to further define the scope of services and the approach for proceeding with the project. We also invited Sam Johnson, a colleague with BLDD Architects, to help with this project. Mr. Johnson is a certified as a school facility planner with the Council of Educational Facility Planners International. UNICOM•ARC has worked with Mr. Johnson in school districts in Missouri, Illinois and Iowa.

It was agreed that a session would be held at Roosevelt High School on Wednesday evening, October 2, from 6 – 8 p.m. and at Central VPA/NJROTC Cleveland High School on Saturday morning, October 5 from 10 a.m. - Noon. Because of his extensive experience in facility planning, it was decided that Sam Johnson would make the informational presentation about the facilities and options for improving them, following an introduction to the process by Dan Burns from the UNICOM•ARC staff. Part of Mr. Johnson’s presentation covered characteristics of 21st century learning environments.

Communications/Promotions for the Sessions

Multiple communication strategies and vehicles were used to announce and promote attendance at the sessions.

- Four robo-calls were made to Mann and Shenandoah school parents
- A press release to the St. Louis media
- Flyers were sent home (via students) Mann and Shenandoah parents
- Flyers were sent to neighborhood association leaders
- Neighborhood leaders used their communication vehicles to notify their constituents
- A briefing session was held with Mann and Shenandoah principals
- A briefing session was held with neighborhood association leaders and alderpersons representing the area served by the two schools
- The SLPS website and social media (Facebook/Twitter) was utilized
- A news item aired on KMOV-TV Channel 4
- A news story appeared in the Post Dispatch
- There was news coverage of the Wednesday evening session by Channel 4 and 5; and by the Post Dispatch that also announced the Saturday morning session.

The Sessions

The sessions were organized in a workshop format. As attendees arrived they were given a number that assigned them to a table (small group). Each small group had 4 to 6 individuals. Each table was asked to select a “facilitator” and “reporter” (to complete the work activity form on the table).

Both sessions began with a PowerPoint presentation (presented by Mr. Burns and Mr. Johnson) that provided:

- background information regarding the purpose of the session;
- key information from the MGT Facility Assessment Study, with particular emphasis relative to the Mann and Shenandoah schools;
- a description of characteristics of 21st century school facilities;
- an explanation of the potential proposals for moving forward with new and or renovated facilities for the Shenandoah site; and
- explanation of the small group work activity.

Participants were given copies of the PPT and work activity. These documents are provided with this report. The work activity instructed each group to come to consensus or general agreement in response to two tasks. Each group was asked to indicate the group’s level of favorability for each proposal with “1” being least favorable and “5” being most favorable. Task 2 asked each group to provide comments regarding issues, questions and suggestions that

SLPS should address in moving forward with either of the proposals. (A copy of the work activity sheet is included in this report for your reference.)

Session Attendance

An attendance sign-in sheet was placed on each table and attendees were requested to place their name and contact information on the sheet, including whether they were a parent, community resident, staff or other. Based on the sign-in sheets, slightly more than 100 people participated in the two sessions—approximately 50 participants in each session. Again, according to the information provided on the sign-in sheets there was a good balance of parents and community residents, with perhaps slightly more community residents than parents. There were nine small groups at the Wednesday session and eleven at the Saturday session. The sign-in sheets will be given to SLPS leadership for future reference and potential communication with the attendees.

Summary Documents

The worksheet from each table (small group) was collected for each session and a verbatim document for each session has been created. This document list verbatim responses of each group for each task. The information is recorded “verbatim” from the worksheets. These documents are included as part of this report.

Summary of Findings

There were nine small groups for the Wednesday session and eleven on Saturday morning for a total of 20 groups.

As described earlier in this report each group was asked to come to consensus regarding their favorability level for two possible proposals.

Proposal #1 — Renovate Shenandoah School and build a new addition at the Shenandoah site.

Proposal #2 — Construction of new school at the Shenandoah site. Once completed, existing Shenandoah building would be demolished.

In further describing the proposals (see the Sessions PowerPoint) attendees learned that upon completion of either proposal Mann would be closed and Mann students would attend school at Shenandoah.

While these were the two official proposals printed on the worksheet, communication to the parents and members of the public also indicated that there would be a third potential option at the sessions—some degree of repair/renovation at Mann and Shenandoah. So attendees arrived expecting to have the opportunity to provide feedback on this option as well. It is safe to say “some” in attendance, a both sessions, were upset that this option was not available. Those participants were assured, by those staffing the engagement sessions, to include that input, including their preference for renovation of the two buildings, on the provided forms.

The general results documented on the worksheets are as follows:

- Five of the 20 groups said they most favored Proposal #1, and six groups recorded it as least favorable.
- Four of 20 groups rated Proposition #2 in the high favorability category, yet 10 rated it as least favored.
- Approximately half of the groups reported high ratings for repair/renovation to Mann and Shenandoah and to keep the schools open to serve their respective neighborhoods. The passion was very strong among those who desired this option. (See the verbatim documents for the explanations given by participants for preferring this option.) Participants from the Mann area expressed high levels of pride in their school and high levels of optimism about their neighborhood. There was clearly a sense among some that closing the school would setback their efforts to rebuild and renovate their neighborhood.
- Besides the raw ratings and responses documented on the worksheets some groups expressed a genuine desire for additional information in order to make a more intelligent judgment and decision regarding the options for moving forward. They particularly expressed a desire to see legitimate cost comparisons of the various proposals.

Some Concluding Remarks

To begin this section, we would like to commend the St. Louis Public Schools for its decision to engage citizens in the Tower Grove area with respect to this important decision. In our view, engaging the community can be a powerful tool for moving a school district forward. As with any program, once it is complete, you can look back and evaluate what was done well, and what could have done better.

In this section, we provide our analysis of this program, broken down into three categories, in hopes these comments will lead to improved efforts to engage the community in the future.

Time:

To be done effectively, community engagement programs take time and time was short for this effort. With construction deadlines looming and a desire to have new facilities open by the 2015-16 school year, there was a very short window to complete this work. This hurt attendance (though we thought attendance was good given the “time” available to promote the meeting). And it hurt the ability to provide information (see below).

Given the short time available to promote the meeting, it was not surprising that attendance tended to be heavier from the Mann area (where there was the sense of losing something important) than the Shenandoah area (where a school would continue to operate). Again, with more time, strategies could have been employed to even out attendance.

Information:

One of the common questions/comments at the tables (there was not a “Question-and-Answer” session during the presentation — participants were invited to ask questions during their small group work activity) was the need for more information. The options, and the issues they involve, are complex and participants asked for wide array of data relevant for making a decision: capacity data, demographic data, information about the ideal size of elementary schools from a curriculum and instruction perspective, life-cycle costs that included staffing, operation and maintenance, student transportation issues, etc. Clearly, “informational overload” would have been easy to achieve during one engagement session.

Given the complexity of the issues, by necessity of time, there was a decision about what to include, and what not to include, in the informational presentation. When questions were asked at the tables, and answers provided, a common response was, “Well, why didn’t you tell us that?”

Ideally, this is an issue that should have been presented to the community in multiple meetings, where each meeting could provide the informational building-blocks for making informed decisions.

Citizen Leadership:

In addition to time and information, another best practice in community engagement is citizen leadership. And again this gets to the issue of lack of time. Ideally, it would have been best to recruit three or four (or more) citizens from the affected area to help with the overall planning of this program, and again ideally, to have actually hosted and moderated the engagement session. There are many reasons for doing this. One, it gives the overall program the credibility that it deserves. Plus, “outsiders” often have perspective not provided by either “insiders” or consultants. One thing is certain, if citizens are involved, you hear much less of the “you are hiding something” criticism.

These comments should not detract from the fact that this was a successful program. Participation was good. People honestly and forthrightly gave their opinions, and though some initially expressed skepticism about the process, we think they left the meeting thinking that their thoughts and opinions would be accurately communicated to the Special Administrative Board of the St. Louis Public Schools.

Again, we commend the St. Louis Public Schools for this effort to engage the community. As with any project such as this, much was learned about community sentiments, and much was learned with respect to making future efforts even more successful.