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ALERT FEATURED

DECATUR SCHOOLS

Community provides input, has questions about Decatur School District's Roadmap 2030 plan

Valerie Wells

Jan 31, 2025



Decatur Public Schools Assistant Superintendent of Teaching & Learning Larry Gray speaks during a community meeting with the Roadmap 2030 committee at MacArthur High School on Thursday, Jan. 30.

JOSEPH RESSLER, HERALD & REVIEW

DECATUR — Needs in the Decatur Public Schools range from more efficient use of district buildings, shorter bus rides, academic improvement, and a solution for Dennis Lab School.

During a community meeting with the Roadmap 2030 committee on Thursday to collect input and suggestions from the public, much of the presentation by district officials was a review of the district's buildings — how old they are, how much it costs to maintain them, what their square footage is and whether that is adequate.

“We're not in a position where we need to build another new school,” said Assistant Superintendent Jay Marino. “We have enough square footage.”

The issue is that some buildings are overcrowded while others are underutilized, said Steve Chassee of Green & Associates, the firm who studied all the district buildings last year and gave the school board a report on each one.

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An elementary school should ideally have about 120 square feet per student, while a high school, with different needs for sports and a wider variety of academic activities, needs at least 200 square feet per student.

American Dreamer STEM Academy, for example, which serves students in K-8, has only 110 square feet per student and is considered overcrowded, though that school will move over the summer to the newly built Dansby Magnet School. Eisenhower High School, with 248 square feet per student, is underutilized.



Steve Chassee of Green & Associates and Decatur Public Schools Assistant Superintendent Jay Marino speak during a community meeting with the Roadmap 2030 committee at MacArthur High School on Thursday, Jan. 30.

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The presentation also covered the costs to return to service the two closed Dennis Lab School buildings on the city's west end. Repairing the structural issues that led to closing those buildings in 2023 would cost an estimated \$3 million for the 110-year-old Kaleidoscope campus, at 520 W. Wood St., where the walls are pulling away from the building, and \$1.5 million for the 114-year-old Mosaic campus, at 1499 W. Main St., where the main staircase in the center of the building was deemed unsafe.

Those repairs, said Chief Operational Officer Mike Curry, would not bring the buildings up to current standards for a school, but would only make them safe for occupation again.

But when the presentation did not include Dennis' temporary home at 300 Meadow Terrace Place, people in the audience who are connected to Dennis called out questions about why they were not mentioned.

“You're not part of the plan,” Marino said, which drew further called-out comments, some angry. Marino clarified by saying that the temporary location, which includes modular classroom and office units to allow for housing the entire K-8 school on one campus, is not intended as a long-term or permanent solution.

“My son is in eighth grade and this is the third school he's been in,” said Mark Glause. “Our kids are feeling neglected and rejected.”

A lack of consistency, both in quality of programs and amenities at buildings, is part of why the district is losing students, said parent Nick Crim.

“(The students) deserve consistency,” Crim said. “For three years, I haven't known where my son is going to go to school next year. These 50- to 70-year old buildings are not going to be around for 30 or 40 years.”

Dennis teacher Phil Winecke asked what a long-term solution is, if Dennis is not part of the overall plan.

“We have 550 kids at this school,” he said. “Where are you going to put 550 kids?”



Educators and community members attend a community meeting with the Decatur Public Schools Roadmap 2030 committee at MacArthur High School on Thursday, Jan. 30.

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One of the “core values” that will be addressed in the plan, Marino said, is consistency, providing every Decatur student with the same education and opportunities no matter what neighborhood or zip code they live in.

Other issues brought up by audience members included bus transportation. Because of boundary lines and magnet schools, some students spend a lot of time on buses every day. Staggered start times, to allow for fewer buses to handle all the routes, have not fixed the problem of long rides. High school students must take city buses, and the city routes don't always line up with dismissal or with the end of a sports practice or after-school activity.

City council member Pat McDaniel also asked about finances for the district, now that the extra money provided by COVID relief funds has run out. For the city of Decatur, he said, the council raised property taxes by 6% to account for the coming shortfall.

The schools, which received a significant financial boost due to those funds, will also need to budget for that, he said.

“We're doing scenario planning,” Curry said. “We're trying to figure it out.”

One program that began with that funding was the extended day program, which provides care and activities before and after school for Decatur students at no cost to families. COVID funds also covered much of the cost for building the new Dansby building.

Staffing is also an issue, with 140 vacancies in the district: 66 certified teachers, 28 other personnel, and 46 positions in special education.

Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning Larry Gray also spoke about academic needs in the district. The annual School Report Card compiled by the Illinois State Board of Education shows a 74% graduation rate in Decatur Public Schools, with only 17% of eighth graders passing algebra, 45% chronic absenteeism, 9% of students at grade level in language arts and 3% at grade level in math.

“Were not where we want to be,” Gray said.

The plan, which is in development now and will be presented to the school board for approval in May, will include elements from every aspect of the school district: academic goals, staffing, facility usage, operations and policies, all based on a review of data.

Once the plan is approved, the 2025-26 school year will be a year of planning and preparation, with implementation in the 2026-27 school year.

A second meeting, 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 20 at Johns Hill Magnet School, and at that meeting, she said, the committee will present a variety of options for addressing community concerns based on what they heard at the Jan. 30 meeting.

Photos: Open house for Dennis Lab School



Families tour the modular classrooms for fourth through eighth graders during an open house for the temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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Special education teacher Ashley Tyler unpacks materials in her new classroom during an open house for Dennis Lab School's modular classrooms in Decatur on Wednesday.

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A classroom is set up in one of the modular classrooms during an open house for the temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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A welcome mat decorates the doorway in one of the modular classrooms during an open house for the temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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New kindergartener Elaina May, 5, plays on the new playground during an open house for the temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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Dublynn Hoerr, Dallas York, Deacon Hoerr, and Patty Gross meet Deacon's new first-grade teacher, Emily Kelley, second from right, during an open house for the temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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Assistant principal Keith Creighton talks to a student in the parking lot between the modular classrooms and the school building during an open house for the new, temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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First grader Channing Smith, right, and other students play on the new playground during an open house for the temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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Families tour the modular classrooms for fourth through eighth graders during an open house for the temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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Deacon Hoerr and fifth grader Dublynn Hoerr meet Deacon's new first grade teacher, Emily Kelley, right, during an open house for the temporary location of Dennis Lab School in Decatur on Wednesday.

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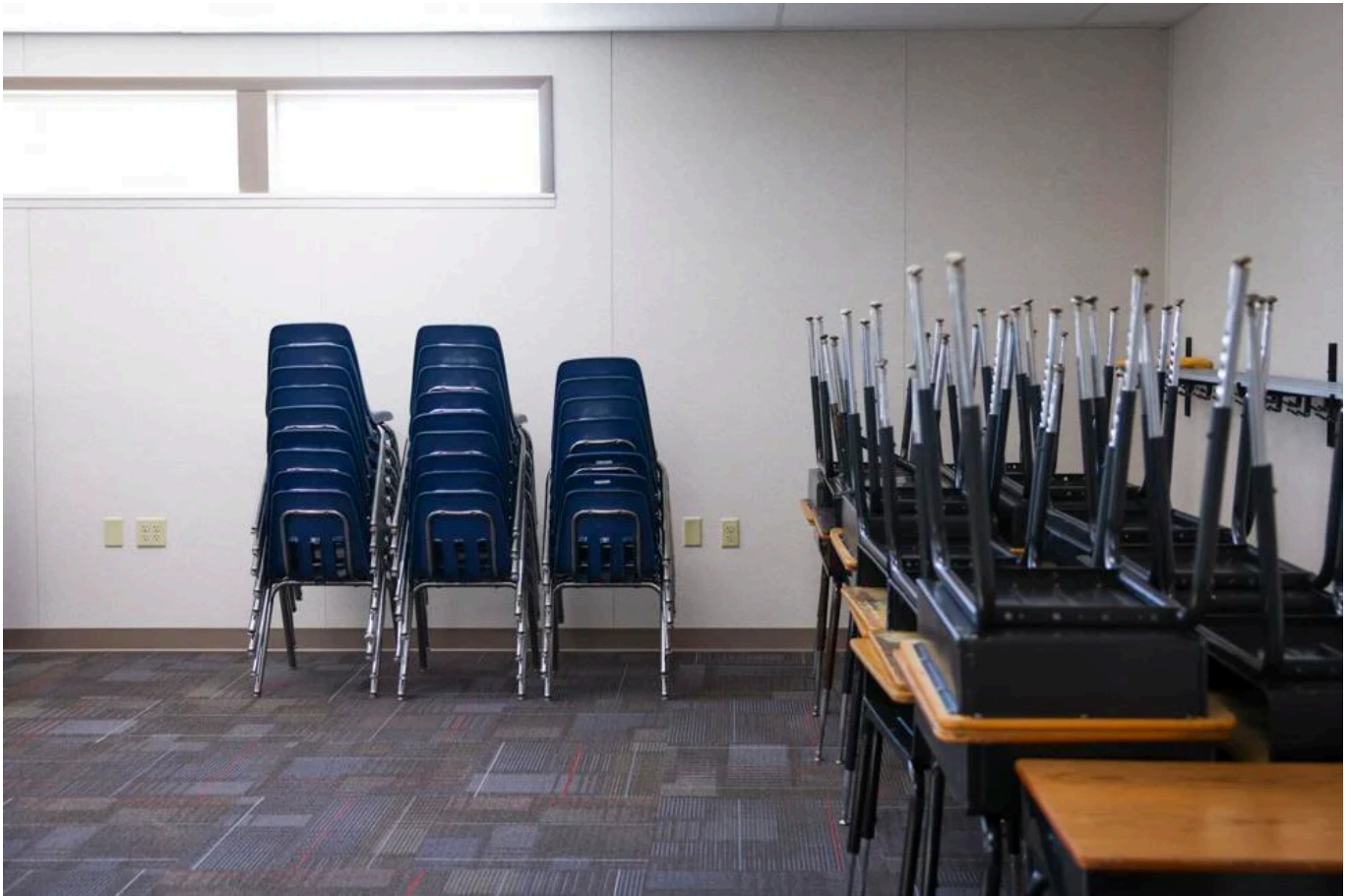
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