

Did Winnetka D36 bring us a better plan?

No. We recommend a “no” vote on the D36 Referendum on November 8.

We are a group of residents who have served D36 in different ways over the years, including on the D36 School Board, Caucus, PTO boards, Future Ready, and Strategic Plan Committees. The 2019 referendum included \$90M of non-essential spending. We opposed it, as did the majority of Winnetka residents, who voted against it by about a 2:1 margin. Did the District listen to voters? Is this a better plan?

With careful study, we attempted to convey the importance of an essentials-only plan to the School Board before this plan was put on the ballot; their adherence to the expansionist plan compels us to urge a “no” vote. This plan expands facilities despite significant enrollment decline, makes long-term investments without an updated demographic study, and asserts gym and lunchroom issues are the inequities we care about when there is a refusal to acknowledge or address more than a decade of reading and math disparities.

We believe it is important to invest wisely in public education, but District 36 has serious quality problems. Voting “no” is a way to hold the District accountable for both quality outcomes and fiscal responsibility.

We support essential spending to maintain and secure aging facilities.

Our priorities align with community survey findings that indicate majority support for investing in District 36’s aging facilities. At the current tax levy rate, the district collects \$3-4M in excess funds per year that are available for capital spending until a referendum of practical size is passed.

A large number of us, along with many in the community survey, also support spending on HVAC and air purifier investments as a response to climate change and for health/safety purposes.

But, we oppose expanding facilities when enrollment has declined. A demographic study planned for Spring 2023 can provide valuable, fiscally-responsible guidance on the District’s foreseeable needs before we commit to extra classrooms and a “community gym”.

The District has a credibility problem.

We voiced our concerns to the District about omissions and distortions in their information, but there has been no improvement in transparency. Below, we present some facts about the facilities plan and enrollment, as well as some concerns about strategic priorities.

Concerns about the 2022 Referendum

District Claim: The new plan is 35% smaller than the 2019 proposal.

Fact: The District has advertised a 35% decrease in the bond issuance without acknowledging that the contribution from reserves has more than doubled. **The total cost of the new facility plan is only 19% smaller** than the failed 2019 plan.

Referendum Comparison (\$Millions)		
	New Debt	Contribution from Reserves
		Total Size

2019	\$91	\$10	\$101
2022	\$59	\$23	\$82
Difference	-34%	+130%	-19%

District Claim: The facilities plan is fair and reasonable.

Fact: This plan expands schools even though enrollment is down **21% from its peak**. At Crow Island, where three new classrooms are to be added, **enrollment is down 25%**.

No demographic study has been done since 2016. Instead of ensuring that facility plans align with anticipated enrollments, the District has proposed to obtain this information **after** the referendum takes place.

District Claim: The Crow Island Gym must be as large as proposed and will serve the needs of the community .

Fact: Board members have claimed that the gym’s large size is a necessity because it will also serve as a storm shelter. The project architect categorically rejected that claim; its emergency function as a storm shelter is unrelated to its proposed size.

Early claims that there is a “Park District Partnership” have been withdrawn since the Park District is not funding any part of construction or facility maintenance, nor has it made any formal commitment as to how it might use the space. It is poor practice to justify such a large project with only vague statements about “community need”.

District Messaging: Disparities between facilities are what’s important.

Fact: Focusing on gym and lunchroom disparities when almost a decade of unequal math and reading scores across our elementary schools have gone unaddressed will not generate educational excellence.

Here are **pre-pandemic** scores on the Illinois state test (the PARCC test):

English Language Arts: students not meeting state standards				
	Crow Island	Hubbard Woods	Greeley	Hi to Lo gap
2017	28%	32%	25%	7
2018	47%	40%	16%	31
2019	38%	47%	27%	20

MATH: students not meeting state standards				
	Crow Island	Hubbard Woods	Greeley	Hi to Lo gap
2017	29%	41%	13%	28
2018	32%	46%	11%	35
2019	23%	45%	10%	35

Another educational concern is the suppression since 2017 of data regarding the performance of D36 8th graders on the New Trier Placement Test (the CPT4 by the ERB). Those results were shared for the previous 20 years and revealed low performance by D36 students. You can see an analysis of D36 results [here](#). The Winnetka Caucus Survey shows that residents overwhelmingly want the information that has been withheld. Will new D36 leadership return to the prior practice of acknowledging and sharing final 8th grade academic outcomes?

District Claim: “When the schools don’t need money, the community can trust the Board not to ask for it.”

Fact: In 2013, the Board made this commitment to fiscal restraint. To demonstrate their good faith, they directed excess reserves (holdings that had grown to 149% of annual operating budget) to pay down debt from the 2007 referendum. Since then, however, the District has continued to overtax residents, collecting \$3-4M more annually than it requires to cover operating costs and recommended reserves.

This is why reserve funds available for the facility plan have more than doubled in three years even though the District significantly outspends other New Trier feeder districts on a cost-per-student basis.

If approved, the facilities plan will result in an increase of \$929 more taxes per \$1M home fair market value while doing nothing to address shortfalls in educational quality.

Once more we ask, “Bring us a better plan!”