

Community Engagement to Elicit Feedback & Gauge Support for Capital Needs & Improvements

Presented at the Komarek Community Forums

November 29 and December 1 & 5, 2018

M² Communications



M² Communications

- M² Communications works with education organizations and school districts to help them use strategic communications to support their efforts to ensure all students get the education they need and deserve.
- Komarek brought us in to gather information and perspectives from the community about how best to support the education, health and safety of all students by addressing the needs of Komarek's aging building.

Phases of M²'s Work

- **Interviews**
 - Spoke with a cross section of the community
 - Established background and context
- **Community Conversations/Focus Groups**
 - Organized by role
 - Parents/Community members
 - Staff
 - Students
 - Invited/encouraged all to attend
- **Survey**
 - Provided another opportunity to be heard – all were encouraged to complete
- **Community Forums**
 - Review M² findings
 - Share ideas on how to address buildings' needs & what that will take
 - Gather your questions & perspectives

Key Elements Supporting M²'s Work

- **Consistent protocol and questions for all interviews and community conversations**
- **Strong, wide reaching communications & outreach plan**
- **Close collaboration with district leaders**
 - To ensure M² is on track
 - To implement the communications plan

Points of contacts with Komarek stakeholders

Interviews		
<i>Stakeholders</i>	<i># of interviews</i>	<i># of participants</i>
Parents, community members, school board members, staff	19	27
Community Conversations/Focus Groups		
<i>Stakeholders</i>	<i># of focus groups</i>	<i># of participants</i>
Parent/community	5 4 in English 1 in Spanish	69
Staff	2	20
Students	1	7
Total focus groups	8	96
Total interviews & focus groups	27	123

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Komarek Interviews & Community Conversations

What we heard

Stakeholders' Views of Komarek

- Stakeholders like close knit feel of Komarek – see the school as central to the community
- Appreciate the education their children receive
- Value the diversity of the school
- Appreciate Komarek's teachers and administrators

Each of the following categories includes direct quotes – *presented in italics* - from stakeholders. These quotes were chosen because they represent the:

- ❖ range of perspectives
- ❖ most common themes

Close knit community

- *I'm happy with it, it's a small town but worldly at the same time.*
- *When I first started here there was a really warm sense of family here, everybody knew everyone and you got to know the families and it was a good feeling being here at Komarek.*
- *It's more like a family than a big school.*

Quality of education

- *I love the small class sizes and what seems to be a commitment to maintaining the small class size.*
- *I like that they offer so much more like sewing, cooking, woodworking, and home economics – what school does that nowadays?*
- *I feel they might have some strain on servicing those that are more advanced, or just the different levels because of lack of resources and lack of space.*
- *My kids received an excellent education.*

Diversity is valued

- *It's a school with a pretty good breadth of diversity. It's a Latino majority but also African American population. I want this for my kids.*
- *The community is changing and the school might not be ready.*
- *Good curriculum is critical – make sure it's relevant to current times, up-to-date, incorporates diversity.*
- *The staff could be more diverse with the changing neighborhood, it's good for children to have role models who look like them.*

Teachers & administration

- *Staff is open to working with parents, open door policy, never feel intimidated or nervous about talking to teacher or administrator.*
- *We have good teachers that are teaching with a limp, low resources.*
- *The attitude of the old administrators wasn't one of respect, honestly, for us Latinos, especially for me personally, because I interacted with them and they looked down on us.*

Current View of Komarek's Buildings

- Stakeholders closest to the school are aware of the current issues with the building – staff, students, some parents
 - Their concerns were very consistent
- Stakeholders less connected to the school are less aware – alums, parents of alums, community members
 - They were influenced by what they heard from those more connected to Komarek

A/C & heat

- *Not having AC is a huge thing. I can't imagine having to teach or sit and learn and pay attention when it's 95 degrees in the classroom.*
- *In the kindergarten, the students couldn't even sit down on the floor because the floor would get too hot.*

Air flow & ventilation

- *When I open the door to the classroom first thing in the morning, it smells bad.*
- *Airflow is significant, we closed for five days because we couldn't break our flu outbreak because there's no air movement.*

Lunchroom

- *It's in the basement, no light, it's a dungeon, it's not healthy. It's 90 decibels when the kids are down there.*
- *Lunchroom is a huge issue – no ventilation, it's in the basement, you've got two entrances and if a fire started, the kids would panic.*

Preschool

- *Preschool is in the basement, and they enter school when 8th graders have recess and they have to walk right past them. The stairs are dangerous. The teachers have to sing a song to remind them to hold the railing.*
- *The Pre-K in the basement and they are next to the woodshop classroom -- there's too much dust and noise. My daughter would come home from Pre-K with red eyes and congested.*
- *There's only one preschool classroom so there's a lot of kids on waiting list.*

Organization of the building

- *Kindergarten teachers complain about taking kids to music class -- it's a field trip in and of itself.*
- *The building not conducive to emergencies.*

Accessibility & special

- *Huge issues with accessibility. You have a big issue with kids not going with their classmates.*
- *What if we had a pre-K student in a wheelchair try to enroll? We would have to outpace them.*

Outdoor space

- *The safety of the streets surrounding the school – drop off, walking to school, the blacktop, there's no barrier to the street.*
- *There's no playground or safe space for the little ones to play, there's no opportunity to burn energy and enjoy playing.*

Running out of space

- *Every classroom, closet, hallway is being utilized – there is no more instructional space.*
- *The classrooms are cramped, a lot of speech and OT happen in the hallway because there's not a room for that.*

Technology

- *With smart board and everything else, I'm not concerned about bigger library, more concerned about space for STEM or a multi-media room where kids could access a 3-D printer, we have to move with the times.*
- *I teach in a neighboring school district and the difference is amazing in terms of technology. I'm not teaching in an affluent district and I'm in the oldest building, but there's still a huge gap with Komarek. Komarek has a long way to go.*

Additional comments

- *I worry that the building hinders our ability to attract teachers, we have so many younger teachers and that's not a bad thing but I think of a teacher a few years into their career would come in and not want to work in this environment. We have so many things to offer but if you look at it, it doesn't look good. And there's no technology infrastructure.*
- *The bathrooms need lots of help, the janitors do a really good job cleaning but sometimes the toilets don't flush or one of the sinks spurts out water.*
- *If the teachers are worried about the structural environment – I'm worried.*

Thoughts on Repair vs. Improve

- *Life safety is a band aid but it doesn't take us to a modern school.*
- *Absolutely, the 12 million won't get them what they need for the population that they have.*
- *It sounds like there are enough serious issues that the answer is yes. But if you aim too high the residents aren't going to go for it.*
- *There was a referendum 10 years ago in RB, and after they finished the work they went way above and beyond what they should have. They gilded the lily.*
- *I think it would depend, everyone would agree that work needs to be done but we're all home owners and we would want to know the money involved.*
- *Might as well fix everything that needs to be done at the same time. Why put the building under construction in two periods?*
- *It makes all of North Riverside more attractive, we're lucky because our taxes are so low. Bring it on – the school has done a lot for my kids, I will support the next generation and what they need.*

How to Pay for Repairs and/or Improvements

- Before it was even mentioned, most stakeholders immediately jumped to supporting this work through taxes/referendum
- Some stakeholders thought some/most of the money could be raised through fundraising (e.g. grants)
- There was some misinformation about how school funding works and how money is raised and managed through a referendum
 - Some stakeholders thought all sections of North Riverside would have to pay for the referendum even if they are in a different school district
 - Some stakeholders thought the Village would manage D94 referendum funds

Thoughts on Referendum

- *We're in a building that is very old. The last work was done in the 50s. This building has been used up and you have to do something to fix it. The band aids aren't going to stick anymore.*
- *No one in this town is rich. If my taxes went up a couple hundred dollars a month, it's worth it.*
- *There's no option but to increase taxes.*
- *Please raise my taxes.*
- *I'm struggling with it, I see it from both sides but I'm not sure I can afford it.*
- *I have some concerns with the dollar amount, it will be a hard pill to swallow but there was not a better option. I wish there was a plan that was under 20 million.*
- *How much are they going to raise taxes? That's scary.*
- *My gut reaction is that I would trust the administration.*

Komarek Survey

Key Take Aways from the Survey

- **Mostly parents responded**
- **Respondents did not align with the racial/ethnic makeup of the school:**
 - **Nearly twice as many White people &**
 - **About half as many Black & Latino people responded as are represented in the district**
- **The survey results tracked with what we heard during the interviews & community conversations**

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What Information Do
Stakeholders Need
Communications Advice

Key Take Aways for Communications

- Be clear on the “why”
- Transparency – what will be done?
- Transparency - how much will it cost?
- Two-way communications & accountability
- Target audiences
- Some key messages
- Consider the messenger
- Clarify the facts on school funding & how a referendum works
- Be ready for/address the ghosts of the RB referendum & other financial issues in the community
- Employ multi-pronged communications methods

Be clear on the “why”

- In making your case to the community, you must ALWAYS bring it back to the health, safety and education of the students.
 - *This has to be about students and their health, safety and academic performance.*
 - *What does a new or improved school do to overall school rating? If we get the new improved school, how does that fit into a higher value school from an academic stand point and test scores?*
- A related point is that a vibrant school is the center of the community (your stakeholders already believe this) and supporting the school is a good “investment” – higher property values, more families want to move in.
 - *Your community is as strong as your school.*

Transparency – what will be done?

- Be crystal clear about what needs to be done in terms of health and safety.
 - *It would be nice for the community to see what the violations are and the numbers are.*
 - *What would 12 million give us exactly?*
- Also be clear about what improvements are being made and why.
 - *I want the bullet points; I would need plans A, B, and C.*
 - *What they need to do is break down each item and say what it's going to cost so you can determine what is a priority and what order they need to be done.*

Transparency – how much will it cost?

- From the beginning and throughout the process, stakeholders want specifics on what is being done and how much it costs – both in terms of money and impact on students and the community.
 - *They need specific information – what are we voting for? What is the money going to fix? How will they fix traffic flow during construction? Traffic now is crazy on 23rd Place during drop off and pick up.*
 - *Total transparency – we as parents need to justify to my neighbor why I'm asking you to put more money into the school.*
 - *Specific numbers, how it's going to affect us on an annual basis, on a monthly basis.*

Two-way communications & accountability

- Stakeholders want to be informed all through the process and have ongoing opportunities to be heard. Additionally, they want a group that includes parents, community members, and subject matter experts (e.g. engineering, finance) who can be more closely involved and help provide information and oversight.
 - *It would be nice for the parents and community to have the ability to be involved throughout the process, we want to be included in all the decisions and our voices heard throughout the process.*
 - *There needs to be a committee that has parents and community members on it too, overseeing any money that gets spent on any improvements.*
 - *I would like to know as a community member who is bidding on these projects, sometimes things get political and it's someone's friend that gets hired.*
 - *We will need a community liaison.*

Target audiences

- While Komarek must continually educate parents, it is critical that those who do not have children in the district are well-informed about the need and the plan.
 - *Komarek has to sell the school, and show that the teachers like working here, show the community that there are a lot of young kids in west side of North Riverside, that young couples are moving here for the school, a couple success stories of graduates in their career – they really have to sell it for people to vote for it. Sell the need and the benefits.*
 - *They have to present options to the whole community, not just parents.*
 - *To get seniors and people without kids – they need to understand what the benefits are for them.*
 - *Need cost benefit analysis to show people that don't have kids.*

Some key messages

- We heard a number of key messages come up frequently:
 - Articulate the specific needs/improvements -- be clear about the price of each and the link to education.
 - Connect the dots on school improvement and property values.
 - Share that much of the buildings are the same as they were when first built in the 1950s.
 - Point out that it has been decades since Komarek went out for a referendum.
 - Be clear what happens if the referendum fails.

Select quotes that back up the key messages:

- *Two big selling points: no referendum since the 50s, our property taxes are low and our services are high.*
- *An investment in the community will increase the value of their home and taxes will go up.*
- *Present the alternatives: consolidation or cutting programs, big classes, home ec. and PE would be gone.*
- *What happens if you can't get a referendum passed since the state requires it? Will the school close down?*

Consider the messenger

- Who delivers the message is as important as the information they convey. Komarek should consider several groups as key messengers and be sure they are prepared with key information:
 - **Parents:** Those closest to the school with intimate knowledge and an emotional connection can serve as powerful spokespeople.
 - **Teachers:** While any district employee is restricted from campaigning while they are “on the clock,” teachers can volunteer to serve as spokespeople in the evenings and on weekends. Teachers are always a highly regarded and trusted source on school matters and this is certainly true in North Riverside.
 - **Civic leaders:** From Village board members, library and park district leaders to church committees and block captains, Komarek’s small community allows for education of these key leaders to help spread the word.
 - *If you can sell this to the people with children in this school, those people can talk to their neighbors without kids and maybe get this passed.*

Clarify the facts on school funding & how a referendum works

- Comments were made throughout the research that suggest not all stakeholders understand how school funding works and how referendum/ ballot initiatives work.
 - **School funding.** Basic information should be presented on – where school funding comes from and how it is used.
 - **Referendum.** Clarity around how the amount is determined, when it would appear on the ballot and who manages the money (several people thought the Village would manage Komarek's referendum funds).

Be ready for/address the ghosts of the RB referendum & other financial issues in the community

- Unfortunately, previous referendums, tax increases and financial decisions by other entities come to mind as stakeholders think about Komarek. We recommend you list all the issues you can think of and be prepared to discuss why and how Komarek is different. Several issues that we heard include:
 - The Riverside Brookfield High School referendum
 - Failed referendums presented by the library and neighboring school districts
 - Recent increases in the water bill and vehicle stickers
 - *It would fail, we tried two years ago at the library and from the people I've talked to, it will depend on what the increase on their taxes are.*
 - *We went through it at RB and it was a rough mess. Our sons' education was messed up and our daughter was affected too. It is a big impact on the community and the dollars spent.*
 - *Like with the high school, there will be concerns because they already have a bad taste in their mouth.*
 - *I believe this is a point they (the district) are going to have to very specifically manage well if they want to have a referendum – they need to present us with realistic projections, and specific numbers – we don't want to have happen here what happened in Berwyn where they told them their taxes would go up \$150 and instead went up \$1000 and people are losing their houses.*
 - *The high school didn't deliver on half of what they said they would do.*
 - *The village is increasing the water bill and vehicle stickers, so they're already seeing increases in ways they can't control.*

Employ multi-pronged communications methods

- Stakeholders agreed that there is no one communication method that will reach everyone so all must be employed. With this said, people did emphasize the value and opportunity for face-to-face communication presented by the fact that everyone in the district lives within walking distance of Komarek.
 - Tours of the building/meetings at the school – systematically invite block-by-block
 - Video/pictures to post/print
 - Door-to-door – talk to and distribute flyers
 - Connect at student drop off and pick up
 - Yard signs
 - Flyers
 - Block captains
 - Social media
 - Texts
 - Emails
 - Local paper
 - Robocalls – school district and Village
 - Community meetings
 - Community partners – e.g. the Village, library and park district – inform & create third party champions
 - Dedicated webpage of information
 - Direct mail

Questions?

Thank you!

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- **Find the full report on the Komarek website:**

[https://4.files.edl.io/
2e50/11/14/18/153927-068de912-469e-44
24-a98c-a86-2270010.pdf](https://4.files.edl.io/2e50/11/14/18/153927-068de912-469e-4424-a98c-a86-2270010.pdf)

