



## RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES

On August 7, 2018, a group of 30 Westerly teachers and administrators met in a three-hour visioning session to present and discuss ideas about designing an Upper Elementary School (grades 3-5) program in Westerly. This new school would house some 575 students and unite all students in these three grades in one new school building at the State Street site.

The conversation began with a discussion about Risks & Opportunities, progressing from there to a discussion on how to design a program that meets the School Department's aspirational vision.

### ***Opportunities***

Since a blank canvas is the starting point, we can build a community for kids of all ages and include teachers and parents. Many ideas were discussed but 100% of the groups were interested in using this opportunity as a way to build better engagement of project-based learning. Learning spaces can be project-based and flexible, with shared student ownership. Some ideas of how this could be executed are:

- Better engagement of students through a more interactive environment indoor/outdoor
- Leverage bucolic sea side community, arts friendly, diversity (economic diversity)
- Allow students to walk and access local places to allow learning to happen naturally:
  - Library
  - Fire station
  - Hospital

Three out of five groups discussed how to leverage technology to make the new building future ready. Additionally the importance of HVAC and to make it future-proof by thinking about technology, hardware, and HVAC. Apart from technology, the majority of the group also viewed the ability to create a family/community-like atmosphere as an opportunity. One way to contribute to a family-like atmosphere is by tailoring teaching methods to students.

Teachers can decide what is developmentally appropriate for the kids. Imagine the whole school teaching mathematics at the same time. Kids could walk to different areas and learn based on need, interest, and readiness. Flexible grouping could also be leveraged to allow students to be together based on needs, intervention, and extension.

The groups also expressed agreement on opportunities such as:

- Greater collaboration and training among grade levels
  - Grade 5 leadership opportunities by working with younger students
- Equitable services
- Opportunity to improve safety based on discussions in past meetings

- Bullet proof glass in front offices
- Bus Safety - same grade levels on busses (k-2, 3-5, 6-8)
- Focus more on resources because of having one building and have scale
- Integrate specialists instead of hopping from school to school
  - STEM science specialist

Other items mentioned during the discussion of opportunities by individual groups are:

- Back to original design for middle school (6-8) to utilize the space
- Scheduling collaboration, more CPT
- Environmentally friendly to teach citizens of the world
- K-12 continuum - Giving them post graduation skills:
  - Critical consumers of information
  - Gig-economy
  - Team mentality and interpersonal skills
- Opportunity to strengthen literacy , reading writing, mathematics in a K-2 school

### ***Risks***

Addressing risks involves anticipating stumbling blocks. However, the future is unpredictable. It's hard to predict how to make the building future ready and will the public even be open to change. Collectively, a major risk that came to the fore was transportation. Traffic patterns would change as would the busing and school schedules. With the new 3-5 school, parents would have to pick up their children from different schools. Will this be a hardship on parents?

Another area discussed as a risk was staffing and alignment across district programs. Currently 5th graders are benefitting from programs at the middle school. This should continue at the new 3-5 school. Yet, staffing (the right people in right positions to carry out the mission and vision of what we want the school to be) can be a block to this if the class size increases but there's less teachers. With these risks in mind, it stands as a caution that the new 3-5 school should not become a silo but stay apart of the district system and program.

Losing the neighborhood feel by transitioning to a bigger school is another high risk. The school should still feel small and part of the community. Without that, there will be a general feeling of disconnect or loss in the new big school along with a lack of personality. Closely related to feeling lost is mishandling transitions from 2nd to 3rd grade and 5th to 6th grade. This was also address by more than one group and should be noted as a risk.

Other items that were less mentioned as risks were:

- Changes to departmentalization
- Preparedness for future security concerns



# Program Vision for School Redesign

**Building on time-honored traditions, Westerly Public Schools will relentlessly and courageously pursue a safe, engaging, and collaborative learning environment rich with challenges and opportunities for all.**

## Essential Question #1:

How can the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School meet the Program Vision for School Redesign? *(Design a new program based upon the aspirational program vision at left)*

## Essential Question #2:

How can the new new 3-5 Upper Elementary School program take full advantage of the scale and capacity of the larger school while maintaining the essential elements of the neighborhood elementary school program? *(Prioritizing opportunities to create an experience that takes advantage of the scale of the new school to provide greater services and support, the continuity of having all sections of each grade together, and the opportunity to provide a smoother transition to middle school for all.)*

## Essential Question #3:

Describe the optimal student and teacher experience in the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School program, and what are the desired outcomes as a result of this student experience? *(Experience mapping the prospective journey of various types of students and teachers. What are their needs along their daily journey and how will this new program address those needs?)*



## Essential Question #1:

How can the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School meet the Program Vision for School Redesign? (*Design a new program based upon the aspirational program vision*)

The discussion on how to accomplish this featured where to locate resources, teacher specialization in content areas, incorporating STEAM, and using the community to teach within the realm of the standards and curriculum. Having resources close by, perhaps all in one hub would make reading specialists, special education teachers and social workers easy to access for the students. This would also promote 3rd and 5th grade interaction. Additionally, 3rd and 5th graders could join together if they had a similar interest or specialization since the teachers are able to target where students need to be challenged. However, this need to be designed so in 5th grade learning can be interest-based while 3rd and 4th grade learning is exploratory based.

One way to incorporate STEM learning and organize it by exploratory versus interest was to have a large school project. Students can work on solving problems in the community together. 5th graders can pick problems to solve based on their interest while 3rd and 4th graders would be more limited. Projects like this could pave the way for flexible learning groups based on levels and interests. Students also don't have to be confined to the building. A "walk and talk" learning environment could lead the students to the downtown area where they can see the seaside community and visit places to show that what they are learning has real world application. To ensure success, the 3-5 school would need to be well staffed, with a Dean of students, resource officer, lead teachers, instructional leads.



## Essential Question #2:

How can the new new 3-5 Upper Elementary School program take full advantage of the scale and capacity of the larger school while maintaining the essential elements of the neighborhood elementary school program?

*(Prioritizing opportunities to create an experience that takes advantage of the scale of the new school to provide greater services and support, the continuity of having all sections of each grade together, and the opportunity to provide a smoother transition to middle school for all.)*

While Westerly is migrating towards a larger school, how can it still remain and feel like a community school that's trustworthy and where everyone wants to be?

Open up the school so the hours are extended past school hours? A coffee shop, social and emotional counseling, or even a community garden will open up the school to feel like it belongs to the community, not just the kids. For those who are unable to get to the building, transportation can be provided. Imagine a parent waiting for counseling at Westerly's own coffee shop! And it doesn't have to stop there. Busing parents to the school during the school day would further open up the school to the community. Further, when it comes to the auditorium, the community needs to be a part of the building to make it equitable for everyone to have a learning environment, not just the kids

Engaging the community involves making it part of the educational plan. A sense of ownership will follow. To extend that same sense of ownership to the kids, smaller communities within the school can be built based on choice, skills, and interests. The middle school is setting the example by adding another area for students to have enrichment.

The focus word of the day is "Open." Westerly needs open rooms and areas where students and adults can collaborate. School is not just for the kids. Their families should and can be involved if Westerly provides a role for the family in the student's culture.



## Essential Question #3:

Describe the optimal student and teacher experience in the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School program, and what the desired outcomes are as a result of this student experience? (*Experience mapping the prospective journey of various types of students and teachers. What are their needs along their daily journey and how might this new program address those needs?*)

Understanding that the goal is to move from the traditional to the innovative for the new 3-5 school still leaves trepidation for the stability needed for 3-4 grades. Are they mature enough to have full choice and learning by interest? Perhaps grades 3-4 are more traditional but leverage flexible options such as cross grouping, crossing classes, interacting with other grades, and extended learning outside the classroom. Departmentalizing may be better places for 5th grade. Even then, perhaps two teachers is better than switching with four teachers.

Yet, not all kids are the same. Do we build a world where some kids have departmentalization with 2 teachers while others have 4? Does Westerly have to have a cookie cutter model? Instead, it can be based on students needs and provide a variety of two, three, and four teacher teams. If departmentalization is decided for third grade, maybe two teachers is enough. Of course, these decisions depend on how many teachers are available. The right number of teachers to make this happen is important. Data is also a key factor. What schools are already using departmentalization for 3-5?

When it comes to teaching styles, don't tell the kids the problem. Teach them to think rather than tell them the answer. One way to accomplish this is to have them take a good look at the community they live in. What problems do they see? How would they fix it? The bottom line is students should be prepared academically, socially, emotionally, and ready to go to grade six. Multiple learning opportunities should be provided for the students throughout the building, not just in the classroom. Lastly, the building should be safe since safety is always first for the students.



**Group 1**

***Essential Question 1 - How can the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School meet the Program Vision for School Redesign?***

- Time Honored
  - Bulldog
  - Downtown
  - Arts
  - Economic Diversity
- Safe
  - Physical as well as social/emotional/ collaborate/ cross-age
  - Relationships, Reading, Writing, arithmetic
- Engaging :
  - Collaborative
  - Open
  - Fluid
  - Resources Close By
- Collaborative
  - Land Trust
  - Downtown/Park
  - Save the Bay
  - United
  - Government

***Essential Question 2 - How can the program take full advantage of the scale and capacity of the larger school while maintaining essential elements of a neighborhood school?***

- What big companies feel small?
- Consistency of Messaging – equity to curriculum
- The neighborhood is my community .
- The neighborhood hardware experience
  - Community Garden
    - Farm to Table
- The community is my school.
  - Transportation
  - Performing Arts
  - Meals
  - Access to Social/ Emotional/ Health Care
  - Adult Relationships/ Social Connections/Think Google
  - Flexible Hours
    - Outdoor space
    - Walking Trail
  - Flexible Community Space
    - Coffee Shops

***Essential Question 3 - Describe the optimal student and teacher (+ family)experience in the new program, and what are the desired outcomes?***

- Continuity of Programming
- Culture of Risk taking for Adults & Children
  - Open to Learning



- Joy
- Staff & Student Relationships – Fun
- Genuine self-esteem, praise the effort + growth
- Collaborative, hands-on, center-based
- “ We’re all in this together”
- Gr. 3&4 traditional
- Gr. 5 departmentalize- perhaps 2 teachers
- Outdoor spaces that can accommodate play time ./ sports

### **Group 2**

#### ***Essential Question 1 - How can the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School meet the Program Vision for School Redesign?***

- Specification in content areas will allow for opportunities and challenges for all students. Students could be shared among teachers to maximize their engagement which providing an opportunity for risk and achievable challenges. This would include both cross grade level and within level placement of students. Specification will allow for greater skill development and expertise in content areas.

#### ***Essential Question 2 - How can the program take full advantage of the scale and capacity of the larger school while maintaining essential elements of a neighborhood school?***

- Plan in the schedule for smaller communities across grade levels within the building and then those communities come together as a larger whole. Communities could be based on choice, skills or interest. Opportunities for choice built into day within schedule that fosters choice and individualization.

#### ***Essential Question 3 - Describe the optimal student and teacher experience in the new program, and what are the desired outcomes?***

- Students will be responsible citizens, good communicators, socially adept, problem solvers who are kind, caring and proficient with technology.
- Teachers specification will allow for quarter vertical articulation.
- Meaningful collaboration that is fostered by dynamic leadership. Shared data, best practices, be a unified team
- Administration that challenges teachers while supporting and encouraging. Keeps students at the forefront when making decisions.
- Effective, planned communication that fosters a culture of collaboration, caring, encouragement and a place people will be eager to come- both teachers and students.
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### **Group 3**

#### ***Essential Question 1 - How can the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School meet the Program Vision for School Redesign?***

- Local Resources – STEAM
  - 3-4 exploratory steam
  - 5- focus on steam
  - Dual Language
  - Cultural Awareness ( Multiple Languages for Signs)



- Community & Citizenship
  - YMCA
  - Library
  - 3rd Grade Focus: Your Community within Westerly
  - Doing something within their community to improve it.

***Essential Question 2 - How can the program take full advantage of the scale and capacity of the larger school while maintaining essential elements of a neighborhood school?***

- Maintain Essentials Elements
  - Invite Parents ( Bus Parents to School) During School Hours
  - Volunteer/ Training, Informal Sessions
  - Display Student
- Larger School
  - Community Enrichment Focus (See Question)
  - Each classroom focuses on a community based activity. School meets and presents Student groups are across grade levels based on interests.

***Essential Question 3 - Describe the optimal student and teacher experience in the new program, and what are the desired outcomes?***

- Central Focus of School : Community and Citizenship
  - Open Ended
  - Student problem solving based on real world experiences.
  - Teamwork, collaboration – Students will present, work together, build upon previous year

**Group 4**

***Essential Question 1 - How can the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School meet the Program Vision for School Redesign?***

- Flexible grouping based on levels and interests throughout grade levels to close gaps

***Essential Question 2 - How can the program take full advantage of the scale and capacity of the larger school while maintaining essential elements of a neighborhood school?***

- Food pantry, clothing pantry
- Community partnerships with WARM & Johnny Cake, Opening Doors, YMCA, Strong art community
- Guest speakers
- Field trips
- Flexible learning spaces – indoors and outdoors' while school activities
- Large auditorium space
- Separate gym and cafeterias
- Adequate parking

***Essential Question 3 - Describe the optimal student and teacher experience in the new program, and what are the desired outcomes?***

- Learning from real world experiences
  - Field trips
  - Community partnerships



- Low teacher : student ratio
- Opportunities for teacher collaboration
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### **Group 5**

#### ***Essential Question 1 - How can the new 3-5 Upper Elementary School meet the Program Vision for School Redesign?***

- All grade 3,4,5 staff
  - Greater opportunities to collaborate and build consistent instructional programed (Teaching and Learning)
  - Increased opportunities for students to walk for instruction
  - Location – access (walk) to community resources – arts, businesses, chamber, library , etc. granite theater, chorus of westerly , bricks and murals) seaside community
  - Social workers, schools pycs- focus on challenges unique to students in grades 3-5
  - Staffing ? Dean of students , resource officer, AP, lead teacher, instructional coaches
  - Physical space- constructed with school safety as a priority (vestibule, entry ;points, etc.)

#### ***Essential Question 2 - How can the program take full advantage of the scale and capacity of the larger school while maintaining essential elements of a neighborhood school?***

- Building Design
- Pods, wings - to optimize small learning environments within larger school
- Safe learning areas for students include creative spaces
- Exploratory, hands on, spontaneous learning opportunities
- Multipurpose space for community guests and other needs
- Lab environments, furniture
- Common spaces
- Meaningful family encouragement
- Purposeful work on school culture
- Lunchroom / playground - designed for this age group

#### ***Essential Question 3 - Describe the optimal student and teacher experience in the new program, and what are the desired outcomes?***

- Intervention / enrichment - across the same grade + across grades
- Mentoring experiences - student to student,, staff member to student
- Successful preparation (academic / social emotional) to grade 6
- Safe physical space
- Not sure about grade 3 departmentalization. Need to do some research, school visits.
- Student needs to come first.