

On April 7, 2026 the Cornell School District will have a referendum question on the ballot to determine whether a new portion of the middle/high school will be built. Since the facility assessment (available for review on our website at the “Referendum Information” button) estimates it will cost over \$15M to remodel our current building while building a new, smaller building (keeping the gym, commons and metals shop) is estimated to be nearly the same price, remodeling is not going to be an option.

Since the fire alarm system does not meet current requirements, if the referendum passes, we will have a new building with a new system. If the referendum fails, we would either need to spend an estimated \$850,000 to replace the system or close the building at the end of the school year. With having an estimated \$3.5M in plumbing work to do within the walls and under the floor along with tuck pointing crumbling mortar joints and bricks of about \$800K, along with a long list of other needs, remodeling is not an option, so the building would be closed.

So I’ve been asked what would happen if the referendum fails and the building is closed? In that case, the 6th-8th grade students could be moved to the elementary school and at least the high school students would be part of a “whole grade sharing agreement” with another school district. While the elementary school does not have the ability to offer some of the elective programs a high school can, we do have room for those students and we could be spending more time on English Language Arts, Math & Science. There used to be over 300 students in the elementary, and now we are under 200 students, so adding one or more of the middle school grades would still result in less students than we have had before. I would recommend to the board of education that we move the middle school students to the elementary school so they do not need to be transported elsewhere and we can keep our specialist teachers (Art, Music & PE) full-time rather than part-time if we have a PK-8 school instead of an elementary school.

What district would the high school students be “whole grade” shared with? While I have not asked all of them if they would be interested, my recommendation to the board would be Stanley-Boyd, Bloomer or Chippewa Falls in that order. My recommendation is based on academic success and student opportunities, not convenience of location. We could run our regular bus routes and then load a bus to go to the district of the board’s choice. Of course we realize many families will likely open enroll their high school students, and maybe others, to the district of their choice based on their location, academic goals, extra-curricular opportunities, etc.

This sets up my greatest fear. If too many students are open-enrolled out of the PK-8 building, it could no longer be a viable option to keep it open and all students could be “whole grade” shared. Why is this a fear? It’s the one all property owners should be concerned about. How many young people do you think would want to buy a home in a community without an elementary school? There are towns in WI with PK-8 districts and buildings that send their high school students to another town for high school, but there are not many towns without a school at all that I can think of that are prospering or even maintaining the status quo.

Now while I believe with my whole heart that the majority of the Cornell School District community will vote yes on the referendum in April, it is also my responsibility to communicate the alternative. Two sections of the current building are over 100 years old. The fire alarm system failed inspection last year and we were granted approval to remain open until our next step is figured out by the results of a referendum. The tentative building we are basing our estimates off of is not a fancy building with lots of space and high ceilings, it only has the space we need to operate, which is about one-half of the space we currently have. I believe we have proven to always keep taxpayers in mind when it comes to spending. We are one of only a handful of school districts in Wisconsin that has never held a referendum to exceed the state imposed revenue caps for operations. We actually collected less money than we were allowed to in taxes two different years, and we have not held a capital improvement referendum since 2001 when the MS/HS received some internal cosmetic improvements and some immediate plumbing and electrical needs were addressed.

I hope you trust that I would not be recommending this referendum to you, the taxpayers and owners of this district, if I didn't come to the conclusion that it is truly needed if you want to keep a high school in Cornell. There will be community meetings on the referendum beginning in November. There will be information in the newspaper and our website will be updated as information is made available. As always, please feel free to reach out with any questions or comments to pmschley@cornell.k12.wi.us or call me directly at 715-861-6970.