

## Planning starts for 3 new schools...

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- Emma June Grosskopf, Review Staff - Jul 14, 2021



The architects brought photos of various elements they've designed in schools nationwide, and the committee placed red dots on elements they didn't like, and green dots on elements they did.

ROMNEY — God is in the details when it comes to designing the 3 new elementary schools here, and the devil is in the decisions:

Cubbies versus lockers.

Hardwood gym floors versus a durable alternative.

Traditional classroom settings versus "next generation" learning.

These new schools will be around for decades, so every decision is a big one, and the county' CEFP committee has their work cut out for them.

Before the school bond passed last year, making the county's dream of new schools a reality on the horizon, a committee was developed to create the 10-year plan for the schools required by the state. This plan, called the Comprehensive Educational Facilities Plan, was put together by representatives all over the county: community members, parents, teachers and school staff.

Now that the bond has passed, the wheels are rolling and the committee has a new job: figure out what we want the schools to look like.

Over the last few weeks, the committee has met with superintendent Jeff Pancione, as well as members of the school board and, of course, the team of architects, to discuss what the new schools will be like.

They even stopped by one of the Summer Learning Academy sites to get some feedback from students.

"The kids talked a lot about being able to learn outside, and bring nature in," said Rob Pillar, designer with INSPIRE Learning Environment Planning. "There are lots of opportunities for that."

Outdoor learning spaces and natural light are 2 school design concepts that are becoming more and more popular.

"People engage with nature; they have a connection with nature," Pillar said. "Natural daylight is proven to increase student achievement."

Pillar will be working with Patrick Rymer, McKinley Architecture's director of architectural services, to design the 3 new elementary schools here, and while they

provided specific recommendations for school safety and security, the rest is really up to Hampshire County.

During one of the planning meetings, Pillar and Rymer taped up photos of schools their firms have designed, and asked committee members to point out elements they liked and elements they didn't.

The result? A broad picture painted of what the new schools might include.

Committee members liked open spaces, bright colors, areas where classes could collaborate and that looked inviting. Natural light was echoed across the board as a need, as well as spaces that just were fun and engaging.

"We don't want schools to be prisons," Rymer pointed out.

Elements that were less appreciated were dull colors, carpeting, ceilings that were too high and aesthetic elements that serve no real purpose other than being decorative.

A big decision the committee made was about school libraries: instead of one dedicated space, the schools will likely have "distributed" libraries, with reading spaces throughout the school, "so kids are surrounded by opportunities to learn," explained school board president Debbie Champ.

While the school designs have a few requirements (for example, security regulations, space and budget constraints), the initial planning stages have begun for the county's new schools, and it's in the hands of the community.

The next step will be for the designers to take the feedback they received from the CEFP committee and translate it into a rough design to present for additional discussion and continued discussion of what will work, what won't and the details needed to pull it all together. o