

AB Building Project Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Design Option Questions

Q: Some of these options include consolidating school programs. What does this mean?

A: If we need to consolidate elementary schools, this will be a process with a lot of discussion; we may have the opportunity to create something new and better. We hope to know more as we advance through this process, which is really 5-6 years in the future. This will be a great opportunity for newcomers and others to get involved. New facilities can allow for new teaching models.

Q: What does it mean to go from 6 to 5 or 4 programs?

A: Right now, we have 6 elementary school programs in 5 elementary school buildings; the Parker Damon building houses McCarthy-Towne and Merriam, and our standalone elementary schools include Blanchard, Douglas, Gates and Conant. Each school has a different educational approach. In some of the options, we will reduce the number of school programs.

Q: Some of the options being considered result in a decrease to five or even four elementary schools. Which one is being eliminated?

A: No decisions have been made regarding how current school programs may or may not change if our building configuration changes. In all likelihood, those school programs affected by the building project will be the ones that will be considered for change, but that does not necessarily mean one will be eliminated. There is a great deal of time still for a broader community conversation about how our existing school programs and philosophies can best be transitioned to new space, and how new ideas may be considered or incorporated as well.

Q: Will we tear down Douglas?

A: No decisions have been made regarding what will happen to the existing Douglas school building. However, it is clear that while we have significant issues at three of our elementary schools (Conant, Douglas and Gates), the Douglas building is in the worst physical condition. That is why Douglas was prioritized in our application for MSBA state funding; however, we may be able to address our needs at the other schools concurrently by doing a broader project, such as a twin school housing students from all three current schools. In some of the options being considered, the Douglas school will be torn down; in some options it may be replaced by a new or renovated school. There is also the possibility that the Douglas site may not hold a school but rather support a larger school on the Gates property by providing additional recreational and parking areas. There is much to still be decided.

Q: Where will Central Office Administration go?

A: In our current options under consideration, our Central Office Administration would remain in the Administration building, also known as the “Old Merriam Building.” However, this is the oldest of our operating buildings and has significant issues as well, so along with any new building or renovation project for our elementary schools, renovations will be planned for the Administration building as well.

Q: Where will the Pre-K in the Administration Building go?

A: It depends on the option chosen. If an Early Childhood Center (ECC) were built, either as part of a new building or a renovation, then both Pre-K programs, from the Administration building in Acton and the Blanchard School in Boxborough, would move to the ECC. If an ECC is not built, Pre-K will likely remain at its current location(s).

Q: What do you mean by a twin or triple school?

A: A twin or triple school is a building that has two or three separate school programs under one roof. Twin and triple schools can be appealing because they can save on construction costs, as there are shared spaces. The Parker Damon building that houses the Merriam and McCarthy Towne elementary schools is an example of a twin school; those two schools share one gym, one kitchen, one cafeteria, and one library. There are challenges in managing the shared spaces and the dismissal process of such a large building, and we would look to take advantage of these “lessons learned” if we move ahead with a twin or triple school. In addition, the MSBA will only work with districts on one project at a time, so for a district like AB with needs at multiple schools, a twin or triple school allows us to meet the needs of more students more quickly.

Q: Where are triple schools currently operating? Are there any schools with our projected number of students in them, as well as with different grade configurations Elementary and PK/K?

A: Triple schools are not common, yet do exist. There is currently one operating in Kennebunk, ME, with three 200-student schools operating under one roof. However, that is half the number of students that would attend an AB triple school, and school size and the educational impact of school size is certainly a point of consideration of this planning process.

Q: Will there be space for Universal All Day Kindergarten (ADK)?

A: Yes, all options provide space for potential implementation of Universal All Day Kindergarten, whether or not there is an Early Childhood Center as a part of the option.

Q: Why is there not an option where we build three NEW buildings?

A: The closest we have to this is Option 5, which calls for significant renovation of Douglas, Gates and Conant. Prior to each project beginning, as a part of the MSBA partnership, an evaluation will be completed of the costs of a new build vs. significant renovation.

Q: How are significant renovations in Option 5 different from Option 7?

A: The main difference is that in Option 5 there are full renovations of Douglas, Gates and Conant, adding and improving instructional spaces, including removing existing modular classrooms. Option 7 doesn't address current space constraints or changes in space due to changes in instructional needs since those schools were built 50 years ago.

Q: For Option 4: what does the evidence show about grade configuration of 6-8 vs. 7-8 with regard to social and academic performance?

A: We have reviewed extensive research in this area. The reality is that many districts have programs designed around their facilities; the studies are inconclusive. Many neighboring towns have middle schools, and the state curriculum frameworks are for 6-8 grade configurations. However, we may not have the luxury of time to change to a middle school because of the current physical state of our buildings, Douglas in particular.

Grade Configuration Questions

Q: How does a reduction in programs support “right sizing” at our elementary schools?

A: Our goal with this building project is to address our current space needs and eliminate overcrowding at our elementary schools. In some of the options being considered, an Early Childhood Center (ECC) will be established, either as part of a new twin school or as a renovation of an existing elementary school. This ECC will be sized to allow us increased flexibility to meet demands for All Day Kindergarten. By pulling Kindergarten classes out of the existing elementary schools, we will gain 2-4 classrooms per building, and that will help ease the overcrowding.

Q: Why is ECC in more options, but middle school is only in one option?

A: The ECC allows us to address overcrowding at all of our elementary schools while addressing the urgent need at Douglas immediately. In the Middle School option, we risk losing our MSBA support, as the Junior High addition would have to happen first before our elementary needs are addressed.

Q: If the Kindergarteners are in an Early Childhood Center, what happens to Reading Buddies and other buddy programs?

A: These programs will likely evolve depending on what option is chosen. In a twin school with an elementary school and an ECC, perhaps the elementary school could buddy with the ECC. Or perhaps buddy programs would just occur between grades 1-6, or between Pre-K and K in the ECC.

Q: How many people make use of the AB Pre-K program? What is the enrollment of Kindergarten?

A: We currently have about 120 Pre-K students, approximately half of whom have special needs. We currently have a waitlist for our Pre-K program, and should be able to accommodate more students with an Early Childhood Center option. Our K enrollment for 2017-2018 is currently approximately 325 students and will likely increase by September.

Site-related Questions

Q: If the new school building is built on the Gates property, what happens to the current Douglas building and site property? What will the effect be on those who currently are walkers to Douglas?

A: This has not been decided yet, though making use of that property in the best way for the schools and towns will be a priority. One idea is to consider the current Douglas and Gates property as a campus, and use the Douglas property to support the new school building with additional parking and recreation facilities. The two properties would need to be made more accessible to one another, perhaps by a larger/drivable/plowable bridge between them. Refining plans for use of that property will be part of the design and feasibility work that will happen prior to construction. Those students that are currently considered “walkers” to Douglas may still be considered walkers to a new building on the Gates property; it will be taken under consideration during the design phase.

Q: Can you build on the Douglas site?

A: Yes, our current Option 2 is a scenario where there is a new twin school (elementary and Early Childhood Center) built on the Gates property and a new single elementary school (1-6) could be built on the Douglas property. The construction can happen while schools are in session, and care would be taken to minimize disruption.

Q: West Acton is densely populated; what would traffic be like at the current Gates school location if we build a new twin or triple school there?

A: At this point, traffic studies showing the impact of a new school or school(s) on the current Gates property have not been done. If it were decided that our best option is for a new building on that property, design and feasibility work would follow, including a study of the impact of increased traffic there.

Q: Why are we not building a new school on empty land in Acton or Boxborough; wouldn't it be easier?

A: Up to this point, we have only considered building sites currently owned by the district. However, based on recent work done in Acton by the Senior Center Study Committee, we can safely conclude that there is not appropriate land available in Acton for a new school. We are currently investigating whether there is available land in Boxborough.

Q: Does Blanchard have space constraints?

A: Yes. There is currently only one empty classroom at Blanchard, and next year, as we add a 4th Kindergarten and expand special education programming in that building, many current uses of space will need to be changed.

Q: Who owns the properties now?

A: The Acton-Boxborough Regional School District owns the current buildings and all of the schools' property. This is one of the challenges, as we don't see any appropriate available land to build a new school in either town at this time. All of the proposed options would be built on current school property.

Q: Has there been consideration given to all of the utility needs of a large building on the current properties?

A: There are no current concerns for septic services or other utilities. Those in-depth studies haven't been performed yet but will be done in the design and feasibility phase.

Process Questions

Q: You applied for MSBA funding and were accepted for Douglas. Did you apply for the other buildings?

A: Yes, we applied initially for Douglas, Gates and Conant. We were required to choose a priority project and chose Douglas. Since then, MSBA requested that we resubmit applications for Gates and Conant, which was done on 4/5/17. This will help keep our needs in front of the organization, but it's important to note that MSBA will only reimburse one project at a time. If our proposed solution were for a twin or triple school, we would receive MSBA reimbursement for the whole building.

Q: Why does it take seven years to build a new school?

A. It doesn't take seven years to build a new school, but the process start to finish does average 6-7 years when you look at the experience of other districts in Massachusetts. We are already about 18 months in as of April 2017. The design phase is projected to take up the calendar year of 2018, and then both towns must vote construction funds. Construction could take 1-1/2 to 2 years, and contingency time is built in.

Q: If you had to pick what needs are more acute, are they maintenance or educational space?

A: We would have to say educational space; there are many instances where services are being provided in our schools in subpar space, particularly in the area of special needs services and English Language Learner Education (ELE) services. Our students and their needs have changed a great deal in the 50 years since Douglas, Gates and Conant were built.

Q: Did you consider the transportation and busing issues of a triple school?

A: Having two or three schools in one building would provide some efficiencies in transportation time and costs. We have not done in depth studies yet, those will happen as a part of the design phase of the project. We are hoping to gain voter approval for these funds at Special Town Meetings on December 4th, 2017 in both Acton and Boxborough, and the design phase would last 9-12 months past that date. This is why we are looking to eliminate options at this time, and is also why we are looking for feedback on specific characteristics in case the options are reworked in a final solution.

Q: When will we have a final option?

A: A *fairly* final proposed option will need to be presented when we ask for design funds at Special Town Meetings on December 4th in both towns. The design and feasibility process may ultimately drive some changes to the proposed option as well. Between now and December 4th, we will need additional community input similar to what we are doing now.

Q: Do you have to knock a building down to build a new one? Do you need to move students out during construction?

A: No. In most of the options, we can fit a new building in the available space without knocking down the existing building. We will not have to vacate the entire building during construction of a new building. The one exception seems to be the triple school option, where there is a small area of overlap between the new and the existing building; either temporary space will be used for some students or perhaps that section of construction could be completed during the summer months.

Q. Will schools still be in session when significant renovations are happening?

A. Yes, construction will happen while school is in session, because with most options, the new buildings are constructed without overlap to the current building. The exception to that is the triple school option, in which a small part of the new building overlaps with a corner of the old one; we would have to do that part of the project over a summer or move those affected to temporary space.

Q: Are the enrollment projections going to be updated to reflect the new construction in the towns?

A: Yes. As part of the process of working with MSBA, we will redo our enrollment projections; they will account for new construction in both Acton and Boxborough

as well as many other factors. That work is due to be completed by September 30, 2017.

Q: How many options do you want to eliminate?

A: We don't know yet. We hope to know as we start to look at the data we're collecting. We also hope to learn from this outreach process what features and benefits are most important to the AB community.

Cost Questions

Q: What is the potential cost savings by consolidating buildings?

A: While we would expect some efficiencies by moving from six elementary schools to five, it is difficult to estimate the amount of these savings. If we consolidate buildings, we would be moving from six elementary schools and a preschool that is currently located in the Administration building and Blanchard school to five elementary schools and an early childhood center which would house the Pre-K and all of the Kindergartens. We would still have six schools overall, but we would no longer have preschool students in the old Administration building. We would likely still have district administrators in that building, however.

Q: Is it possible to identify the tax bill impact of these options?

A: We have not yet identified how this work would affect an individual's tax bill in Acton or Boxborough. That will be done moving forward as we work with our two towns' Boards of Selectmen and Finance Committees and as we have more information from our design and feasibility work. The intention is to plan these as projects that voters in both towns can be comfortable supporting.

4/20/17