

## **Frequently Asked Questions from Public Hearings**

The following is a list of questions raised at the public hearings held on April 22 and May 6 or from emails received by the Board of Education. Questions similar in nature have been combined when appropriate.

### **What is the purpose of the three public hearings?**

To gather public feedback on the impact of the decision whether to close Landmark School, the district scheduled three public hearings.

The specific notification of the Public Hearings is stated as such: Public Hearing concerning the intent of the Board of Education of McHenry School District 15 to discuss whether to close a school building.

Essentially, these hearings are about whether Landmark should continue to operate as a school beyond the 2024-2025 school year.

### **Why is the district considering closing Landmark School?**

After a thorough analysis of the 11 facilities owned and operated by District 15, it was identified that Landmark School, the district's oldest building at 130 years of age, requires attention. Extensive work at considerable cost is necessary to bring the building to the level of safety, security, equity and accessibility that the present and future students of District 15 deserve and that the district is committed to providing. Click [here](#) to access Landmark facility needs findings, which were compiled by Arcon Associates Inc. and Nicholas & Associates.

In addition to the costs associated with these projects, many of them face difficulties and challenges regarding [construction and timelines](#).

It is important to note that the district has invested significant time and money to maintain the Landmark school building over the years. It is a 130-year old building that requires, and receives, a significant amount of attention from the maintenance staff, architects, and engineers every year. There has been no neglect of Landmark School. As stated by the district's architects, Arcon Associates Inc., and construction company, Nicholas & Associates, but for the good stewardship of Landmark school, major renovations would likely have had to occur many years ago.

### **Have there been any discussions with the City of McHenry or other third parties regarding the sale of Landmark School?**

No, the district has had no discussions with the City of McHenry or other third parties (such as developers) regarding the sale of Landmark School.

The district is aware of the proposed development taking place at 1111 N. Green St. and the potential loss of 13 parking spaces used by Landmark staff, the loss of approximately 28 feet of green space east of the Landmark building, and access to the back of the building. At a

minimum, the redevelopment of 1111 N. Green St. could require the relocation of those 13 parking spaces onto the Landmark property.

**What would happen to the building if it were to close?**

There are no current plans for the Landmark school building if it were to close as a school. If it were to close, selling the building could be a potential option. Illinois law (105 ILCS 5/5-22) sets forth a specific process a school district must follow to sell real property, including school buildings. This process includes the adoption of a resolution at an open school board meeting declaring the school site unnecessary, directing the sale of the property by public sale (auction or sealed bids), and determining a minimum sale price (board's discretion). Upon completion of that step, the district would be required to publish a Notice of Sale once a week for three consecutive weeks in a local newspaper. In the case of sealed bids, bids received will be opened at a set time, open to the public. If, after receiving the bids, the board decides to sell the property, it will select the successful bidder and approve the contract for sale at an open school board meeting. Additionally, certain precursor work may be needed in order to prepare the various sales documents, including obtaining an appraisal and developing a property description and contract.

None of these actions or decisions have been taken by the Board of Education and can only be done at properly noticed open board meetings.

The only question being considered at the public hearings is whether Landmark will continue to operate as a school after the 2024-2025 school year.

**Does the district plan on demolishing Landmark School?**

No. District 15 will not entertain the idea of demolishing Landmark School.

**Where will my child go to school if Landmark is closed?**

If Landmark is closed, after the 2024-2025 school year, children would attend their home boundary school as outlined in the district's established [boundaries](#).

**If Landmark students attend their home schools, what is the risk of overcrowding?**

This past year, the district conducted a [study of demographic and enrollment projections](#) to understand and prepare for possible enrollment growth or contraction across the district. The report provides estimated class sizes by school and by grade level for the next 10 years in three separate series of projections (Series A: minimum expectations, Series B: most likely expectations, Series C: maximum expectations). That study, conducted by Dr. John Kasarda, one of the nation's leading researchers and commentators on demographics, shows an expected increase of about 212 students in total over the course of the next 10 years based off of Series B expectations. This represents only a 5% enrollment increase over 10 years. In essence, the enrollment in District 15 is expected to remain stable over the next 10 years.

[Click here](#) to view enrollment projections at District 15 schools if Landmark students attended their home boundary school beginning in the Fall of 2025. Currently, the average class size in District 15 is 20.8. Were Landmark students to attend their home boundary schools, the average class size in District 15 in the 2025-2026 school year would be 20.6. The decrease is the result

of lower expected total enrollment in District 15 in 2025-2026.

**How will my child's education differ if they attend their home boundary school?**

There are several attributes about Landmark that are different from other District 15 elementary schools. One difference is the year-round calendar, which reflects about 25 attendance days throughout the year that differ from other district schools. The other difference is that Landmark loops two grade levels consecutively with the same teacher. Finally, Landmark's enrollment is currently 194 students, which is smaller than the other elementary schools [Enrollment/Demographics](#).

Delivering a consistent educational experience for children across our schools is a priority. To that end, the district works diligently to create a consistent learning environment for children and believes that the similarities between Landmark and other elementary schools greatly outweigh the differences. A list of similarities and differences between Landmark and the other elementary schools can be seen [here](#). Ultimately, while recognizing that each school has unique characteristics, the district believes that all District 15 schools deliver an excellent educational experience for students, embody strong and positive cultures and climates, and are staffed with outstanding teachers, administrators and support staff.

**What will happen to Landmark teachers and staff if the school is closed?**

All current Landmark teachers and staff will still have jobs within the district. If Landmark closes, the district will work with our union to ensure a smooth transition from building to building.

**What other options have been explored besides children attending their home boundary school?**

Several options have been explored:

1. Invest in Landmark and renovate the building to provide a safe, secure, equitable and accessible learning environment for all;
2. Defer or "pick and choose" from the list of projects;
3. Purchase and renovate an existing building to serve as a new school location;
4. Build a new school to accommodate a move of Landmark staff and students;
5. Relocate Landmark to an existing district facility or "sister" facility or add on to an existing building.

The [roadmap](#) that would need to be followed for each of those options was presented at the May 6, 2024 Public Hearing. Each of these options are summarized below:

1. Invest in Landmark and renovate the building to provide a safe, secure, equitable and accessible learning environment for all

- Costs associated with recommended projects range between \$10 and \$13 million. With the removal of the gymnasium construction, costs are between \$8 and \$11 million.
  - Certain projects cannot be done simultaneously and require extensive time to complete which would impact the year-round calendar for at least two years.
  - There is limited land and space for equipment or detention considerations.
  - There may likely be unforeseen issues or conditions that are presented because of the age of the building. The cost projections do not include a contingency for unforeseen circumstances that are often encountered when renovating old buildings.
  - Other capital project needs across the district, which total over \$42 million, would need to be deferred and/or reconsidered.
2. Defer, or “pick and choose” projects at Landmark
- The projects identified at Landmark reflect projects that would make Landmark a viable, long-term building that provides a safe, equitable, legally-compliant learning environment for present and future students. Piecemeal work towards projects is incompatible with that goal.
  - Delaying projects could also pose potential risk to students and staff, and does not imminently address equity and accessibility concerns.
  - Most of the projects are interrelated and are difficult to be separated out in a responsible and efficient manner.
  - Maintenance/construction/renovation costs would likely increase over time as these projects are delayed.
3. Purchase and renovate an existing building to serve as a new school location
- Limited available spaces exist in McHenry that could conceivably be retrofitted into a functional school.
  - Most commercial buildings are not suitable for a school building because of inherent issues such as their current state of repair, lack of windows, ventilation, internal and external access, control of the property, green space, etc.
  - By law (105 ILCS 5/10-22.36), purchasing a building to serve as a school requires a successful public referendum to be passed.
  - Cost estimates to acquire buildings in McHenry are between \$1 and \$2.4 million.
  - Renovation cost estimates for a renovation project such as this are \$350 per square foot to turn a vacant commercial space into a functional educational space. Thus, to renovate a building at the approximate size of Landmark (21,000 square feet) would be approximately \$7 million.
  - The district would not be able to replicate the positive learning environment and conditions that exist in the other schools with any type of renovation such as this.
  - Safety, security, and health life safety concerns exist in a plan to retrofit a building into a school.
4. Build a new school to accommodate a move of Landmark staff and students
- By law (105 ILCS 5/10-22.36), building a school would require a successful public referendum to be passed.

- “All in” cost estimates for new construction are \$650 - \$700 per square foot. Therefore, replicating the approximate square footage of Landmark (21,000) square feet is \$13.6 - \$14.7 million.
  - Schools today are built for the sake of efficiency and to accommodate more students and staff and consolidate resources. Building a school of 21,000 square feet would be an unorthodox practice.
5. Relocate Landmark to an existing district facility or “sister” facility or add on to an existing building.
- The district would need to find appropriate land and space at an existing school that could accommodate an approximate 10 classroom addition. The estimated cost of a 10 classroom addition is approximately \$9 million with an estimated construction timeline of at least one calendar year
  - The one-year construction period would likely not match with a 9-month school year, and thus would not be ready for use for two school years.
  - Utilizing the freshman campus was an idea suggested to and considered by the district; however, at the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year, the freshman campus will have no unused classrooms in its building.
  - A tangential idea of utilizing the freshman campus parking lot (using mobile units as learning spaces for children) was also explored. Cost estimates for annual rentals of 10 mobile units is \$600,000 with an additional \$800,000 of fees/costs. Major concerns regarding safety, security, lunch times, and replicating positive learning conditions also exist with this plan.
  - Challenges are presented with “school within a school” models in which shared spaces exist. In a model explored that had Duker students and Landmark students both attend Duker School, there would be almost no demarcation lines, physically or operationally, that would indicate where one school began and another ended. Shared spaces in which students would blend would be the gymnasium, cafeteria, stage, art room, music room, playgrounds, bathrooms, hallways, entrances, exits, office, buses. Also, Duker School was formerly a building that serviced junior high school students so much of its infrastructure, most notably the bathrooms, are constructed for older and bigger children.

### **How would the district consider closing Landmark School when it attained Exemplary status last year?**

The district is proud of Landmark School attaining Exemplary status on last year’s Illinois Assessment for Readiness (IAR) as well as previous times other schools in the district have met this designation, most recently Riverwood Elementary School in 2019. The district is proud of all eight schools and believe each of them deliver an excellent educational experience for students, embody strong and positive cultures and climates, and are staffed with outstanding teachers, administrators and support staff.

District 15’s schools, Edgebrook, Duker, Hilltop, Landmark, MMS, Parkland, Riverwood and Valley View, all provide incredible opportunities to students academically, social-emotionally, and physically that will benefit them both in and out of the classroom. The State’s model of labeling schools according to certain categories (Exemplary, Commendable, Targeted,

Comprehensive, and Intensive) based on IAR results tells an incomplete story about the quality of education in each building. IAR scores are but one data point schools use to gauge student growth and performance and reviewing them in isolation does not provide the full picture or allow schools to demonstrate their true successes. Many factors play into the standardized achievement scores of our schools and demographic differences between the eight schools in District 15 makes direct comparisons difficult. Click [here](#) to review District 15 demographic information.

### **What was the rationale for purchasing the new central office?**

The former District 15 Central Office building, which was located at 1011 N. Green Street, had several limitations and had ultimately reached a “tipping point” that required action. The critical limitations of the building were in the areas of ADA and USDL compliance, safety, security and well-being of employees and visitors, limited space and storage, functionality and service to staff and students, and learning and operations.

To address these limitations, several options were considered which were: 1. Renovate the building; 2. Build a new building; 3. Purchase existing office space; 4. Do nothing. The presentation exploring these options can be seen [here](#).

After thorough analysis, the costs associated and the challenges that came with renovating an old building proved renovation to be a poor option. Estimates to complete the necessary projects were between \$3.5 - \$4.0 million. Additionally, architects and construction firms doubted the ability to accomplish some of the necessary work because of the age, size, and condition of the building and the small land area of the property. Furthermore, the renovations would be unable to address key ADA enhancements or add needed space to the building and property, such as required interior elevators or required chair lifts that could not be installed as they would have blocked egress from the building.

The option to build a new central office was not deemed a fiscally responsible action. Estimates to complete such a project were between \$9 and \$10 million, plus the cost of purchasing land. Delaying work was also not a viable option because the building did not meet ADA recommendations and was no longer functional for an organization of District 15’s size.

Ultimately, the option to acquire a new office building proved to be the most fiscally responsible course of action. The district was able to acquire the new office building for \$1.6 million. After renovation, the total cost was approximately \$3.2 million. The district sold the old central office building for \$500,000 to the Youth and Family Center of McHenry (YFC). The district believes the decision to acquire the new central office building was a fiscally responsible, long-term solution.

A tangential question on this matter is why the district did not consider using Landmark as the new central office. Considerable costs would have been necessary to retrofit Landmark School as an office, meet ADA guidelines, and address safety and security measures. The cost to acquire the new location was significantly lower than what the costs would have been to retrofit Landmark into a central office.

**Why can't the district defer the renovations to Landmark?**

Ultimately, the projects identified at Landmark reflect the projects required to make it a viable, long-term building that provides a safe, equitable, legally-compliant learning environment for present and future students. Piecemeal work toward projects is incompatible with that goal. Delaying projects could also pose potential risk to students and staff and does not address equity and accessibility concerns and limitations that currently exist. Also, deferring projects increases costs associated with maintenance, construction and renovation.

**How would a new TIF impact District 15 schools and our residents?**

The possibility of a TIF district encompassing the Landmark property is not a factor in the decision at hand: whether Landmark should continue to operate as a school past the 2024-2025 school year. If a TIF district were created that included the Landmark school property, the district would not receive any additional increased property tax revenue from the properties inside the TIF district for a period of 23 years. To clarify a comment made at a previous hearing, TIF districts are approved by local municipalities. Local taxing bodies such as District 15 do not have the right to approve or disapprove the implementation of a TIF district. To learn more about Tax Increment Financing, please see the following link. [TIF Fact Sheet](#).

**Why does District 15 maintain a fund balance, and how are those funds used to pay for capital projects at the schools?**

The District's fund balance is an accumulation of operating surpluses and deficits. In line with responsible fiscal management, the district invests these funds into interest-bearing accounts.

The Fund balance is aggregate of all nine of its funds:

- (10) Education
- (20) Operation & Maintenance
- (30) Debt Service
- (40) Transportation
- (50) IMRF/ Social Security
- (60) Capital Projects
- (70) Working Cash
- (80) Tort
- (90) Fire Prevention and Safety

Each of these funds is established for specific activities and objectives and is operated in accordance with laws, regulations, restrictions or other designated purposes. There are legal guidelines and limitations as to how districts can transfer these balances from fund to fund.

In recent years, such as in 2020, the district used approximately \$3.6 million of fund balance to pay for the Parkland addition. The district intends to leverage these balances to finance future capital projects in instances when the revenue received to cover the cost of needed capital projects.

It is important to note that the district has invested significant time and money to maintain the Landmark school building over the years. It is a 130-year old building that requires, and receives, a significant amount of attention from the maintenance staff, architects, and engineers

every year. There has been no neglect of Landmark school. As stated by the district's architects, Arcon Associates Inc., and construction company Nicholas & Associates, but for the good stewardship of Landmark School, major renovations would likely have had to occur many years ago.

**Why did the April 9th Board of Education meeting identify Landmark's year-round calendar as a challenge?**

Part of the April 9th Board of Education meeting was a review of the findings of a [SCORE analysis](#) where various strengths, challenges, opportunities, risks and the effectiveness of the [Finance and Facilities Focus Area](#) of our Strategic Plan was analyzed. A number of challenges (15) were identified which encompassed a wide variety of aspects of our school system.

One of the challenges identified was having one school operate under a year-round calendar while other schools operated on a traditional calendar. Maintaining two separate calendars limits efficiencies in state reporting, payroll, busing, summer learning, professional development, digital resources, and the timing for the completion of capital projects. The District has been able to maintain two calendars, but doing so presents certain challenges and inefficiencies that were identified during the course of the exercise.

It is important to note that the inefficiencies created by maintaining two calendars has not played a key role in the decision whether Landmark should continue to operate as a school beyond the 2024-2025 school year.

**How many districts run a year-round calendar and would the district consider expanding the year-round calendar model?**

In the past, the District has evaluated whether or not to expand access to a year-round calendar but it has been met with limited interest. In fact, across the state the implementation of a year-round schedule is extremely rare. According to research conducted and the data available, there are 21 schools in Illinois that utilize a year-round calendar and 14 of them begin their year in August rather than July. No other elementary or high schools in McHenry County run a year-round calendar. Finally, with the exception of perhaps one other school/district, the adoption of a year-round schedule is done uniformly across all other districts in Illinois, with matching traditional calendars for elementary school, middle school, and high school districts within communities. Based on this trend, there does not appear to be widespread support for expanding the year-round calendar model.

**What are Capital Project List A and Capital Project List B, as presented on April 22nd?**

The board requested that the administration provide a list of capital projects that would be necessary over the course of the next five years, the estimated cost of those projects, and in what years those projects would likely occur. The board requested that two options be presented for review - one that included the capital projects needed at Landmark and one that did not. All of the projects on both lists are known, necessary projects. The key question between Capital Project List A and Capital Project List B was to determine whether the capital projects at Landmark should be completed or not.



**Why is the cost of projects at McHenry Middle School over \$12 million dollars?**

McHenry Middle School is the district's newest building, but it is now 25 years old. Typical of other buildings near that age, it requires ongoing work to maintain, including roof replacement, HVAC work, and flooring. McHenry Middle School is over 115,000 square feet and currently houses approximately 700 students. The costs for capital projects at such a large facility are expensive but necessary.

**Why are unnecessary expansions and renovations factored into the budgeted financial state to keep our school opened?**

All items on the list of needs for Landmark have been discussed over the years and expressed as needs at one time or another. The district views them all as necessary work to bring it to the level of safety, security, equity and accessibility that all students deserve and the district is committed to providing.

**Why wasn't an alternative option presented for Landmark renovations that included only safety expenditures?**

With the exception of the gymnasium, all other items reflect work in the areas of safety, security, and accessibility. The new gymnasium was included because the current one is not the same size or quality as gymnasiums as at other schools. Moreover, parents and staff over the years have requested a full-size gymnasium. The district believes that many people view an expanded gymnasium as essential. The estimated costs of projects that do not include a new gymnasium is \$8,256,500 - \$10,417,800.

If significant funds were to be invested into the Landmark building, it would have to achieve the goal of making Landmark a viable, long-term building that provides a safe, equitable, legally-compliant learning environment for present and future students. Doing only some of the projects therefore would be incomplete and would be incompatible with that goal.

**Were issues such as the roof and other routine maintenance items deferred rather than being a part of a routine maintenance schedule?**

The district conducts regular maintenance at all of our facilities including Landmark. It is important to note that the district has invested significant time and money to maintain the Landmark school building over the years. It is a 130-year old building that requires, and receives, a significant amount of attention from the maintenance staff, architects, and engineers every year. There has been no neglect of Landmark school. As stated by the district's architects, Arcon Associates Inc., and construction company Nicholas & Associates, but for the good stewardship of Landmark school, major renovations would likely have had to occur many years ago. However, the fact remains that real challenges exist in meeting all the needs of this building such as the year-round calendar, difficulties in the site such as usable land for equipment and detention, and unforeseen issues that may arise from work conducted on old buildings.

**Why doesn't the district use the fund balance of approximately \$70 million to renovate Landmark School?**

The district's fund balance is an accumulation of operating surpluses and deficits. In line with responsible fiscal management, the district invests these funds into interest-bearing accounts.

The fund balance exists, in part, for situations when the State of Illinois does not pay its bills (which has occurred from time to time over in the past) and when the State of Illinois shifts financial responsibilities to local taxing bodies. For example, the State has considered shifting the cost of pensions from the State to local school districts. Doing so would be a financial challenge that could require the use of the fund balance.

District 15's fund balance is the result of good financial stewardship of taxpayer dollars over many years.

The Fund balance is aggregate of all nine its funds:

- (10) Education
- (20) Operation & Maintenance
- (30) Debt Service
- (40) Transportation
- (50) IMRF/ Social Security
- (60) Capital Projects
- (70) Working Cash
- (80) Tort
- (90) Fire Prevention and Safety

Each of these funds is established for specific activities and objectives and is operated in accordance with laws, regulations, restrictions or other designated purposes. There are legal guidelines and limitations as to how districts can transfer these balances from fund to fund.

In recent years, such as in 2020, the district used approximately \$3.6 million of fund balance to cover the Parkland addition. The district intends to leverage these balances to finance capital projects in instances when the annual revenue received to cover the cost of needed capital projects falls short.

**How much liquid assets does the District have in addition to the \$70 million in investment assets?**

The district holds several accounts at McHenry Savings Bank for payroll, accounts payable and activity account purposes. The amounts within those accounts fluctuate but are maintained, on average, around \$2 - 3 million. It is important to note that these funds are not considered fund balance but operating revenue needed to operate the school district. These accounts are essentially equivalent to a "working cash" fund used by businesses.

**Why is it projected that all schools in the district will need a new roof?**

The roofs of all buildings in the district will need to be replaced at some point due to the age of the buildings. It is important to budget for and plan for these major projects years in advance. Moreover, it is critical to replace roofs because not doing so leads to other and more expensive repairs. It is important to note that roof replacement at any school is a time-consuming project that requires all of the summer months to complete.

**Why is the district looking into finding a home for its maintenance equipment and not our Landmark students?**

This idea was one of many that came up in our [SCORE analysis](#) as potential opportunities for improvement. Many of these ideas were conceptual in nature and the purpose behind the exercise was to brainstorm any and all possibilities to address challenges or risks that limit the district's overall efficacy. The district has many vehicles in its fleet used for the maintenance of facilities (snow plows, skid steers, trucks, trailers, etc.) A facility to house them would protect those assets and add life to them.

The reality of a project like this is slim as there are far more pressing needs. The purpose of the SCORE analysis was to comprehensively consider all facets of District 15, and then to prioritize projects in a manner consistent with the District's [Strategic Plan](#).

**If the district is looking to make all elementary schools K-5 and reduce transitions that have shown to be detrimental, why not utilize funds to expand Hilltop and Edgebrook? Then Duker would be available for our year round program.**

Moving to K-5 buildings (or campuses when more appropriate) was an idea brought forth in a [SCORE analysis](#) activity. The purpose of the SCORE analysis was to comprehensively consider all facets of District 15, and then to prioritize efforts in a manner consistent with the District's Strategic Plan.

Major projects such as this have relative merits and drawbacks in which intended and unintended consequences would need to be explored. Significant planning, research and consideration on how a project such as this would impact the entire district would need to be conducted. Long-term budgeting (estimated costs for a 10 classroom addition are approximately \$9 million), construction planning, boundary studies and dialogue with the community would need to take place. Thorough research on transitions, primary/secondary centers, neighborhood school models would also be a natural part of such a project. At this point, the idea of moving to uniform K-5 buildings or campuses is conceptual and may or may not prove feasible.