

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **How much space is needed for 40-80 students?**

(Note: When Lincoln served 3rd and 4th grade it served 320 students.)

- a. There are approximately 80 full-time students. The students at the Area Learning Center use very little space; however, the students within the Bridges and PALS program need a significant amount of space.

Traditional Schools	Setting IV Programs
Serve class sizes of 20-24	Have a maximum of 8 students per teacher. Some of the programs have smaller maximums, and the law indicates we must adjust downward for increased variety of student needs, ages, and severity of disabilities.
Served 2 grades	Serves 13 grades
One teacher and potentially one paraprofessional per room.	All classrooms need on teacher and one paraprofessional, but most need additional resources.
A small portion need additional services in the areas of occupational therapy, speech therapy, mental health, etc.	Nearly all of our students need specialized services.
Students may need a small amount of sensory regulation such as fidgets and occasional breaks.	Students need significant sensory including climbing, swings, balls, trampolines, special lighting, weights, enclosed spaces, etc.
Students fit within a traditional space	Students need space due to heightened anxiety and relational issues. Smaller spaces lead to safety issues.

- b. The square footage is similar to other projects that have recently been completed by other Cooperatives/Ed Districts/Intermediates around the State of MN.

- Austin & Albert Lea recently “guttled” a building and built all new walls in a 21,023 square foot space for 40 students. This is 526 square feet per student.
- Goodhue County Ed District recently built a new building that is 68,000 square feet for 120 students at 566 square feet per student.
- Karner Blue was recently built at 72,115 square feet for 115 students at 627 square feet per student.
- We are proposing approximately 46,000 square feet for 80 students at 575 square feet per student. The additional square footage is for Southern Plains offices, itinerant staff, audiology booth, and the PAES lab. Note that not all of the space within the Lincoln building is usable. The buildings above were specifically built for these programs or completely gutted. In the Lincoln building there are some features that have to be used “as is” which creates inefficiency.

2. **Why is it that 320, 3rd and 4th graders fit in the building, but you need to add on to meet the needs of 80 students?**

- There will be 80 full-time students in the building; however, additional programs in the building include the Southern Plains central offices, an audiology booth, and the PAES lab.
- All classrooms have students from multiple grade levels.
- A typical elementary classroom holds 20-25 general education students. Most Southern Plains programs have a limit of 8 students per classroom (MN 3525.2340).
- Students within the classrooms need a place to regulate themselves (calm down) before behaviors escalate. Students can then return as soon as they calm.
- Many of our students need to work on functional living skills. This requires separate space to work on these skills.
- Almost all students need specialized services, including mental health staff, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, etc.



- Many students have processing difficulties. Sensory rooms help students explore and develop sensory skills. This regulates their sensory status to reduce aggressive behaviors.
- There needs to be adequate space between students to ensure student safety and reduce escalation. Without this space staff gets injured and/or other students become escalated.
- We have had students within the programs that have either been sex offenders or victims of sexual trauma which results in students needing to be separated from other students.
- We have had several sets of siblings that need to be

separated from one another.

- “I often thought, they wouldn’t think of putting a classroom for physically challenged on the top floor of a building with no elevator. Why would they place a class for students with emotional problems without adequate crisis support rooms?” (Behavior Advisor)

3. **What members of the current SPEC staff and board members have had user input into the redesign of Lincoln?**

- a. All board members, superintendents, and setting IV SPEC Certified staff in 2014-15 were part of a facilities study.
- b. Since that time there have been numerous discussions with board, superintendents, and staff. Sarah has also sent out regular email updates asking for input. Two significant messages from these discussions were that individuals want a long-term solution so that we can move forward with programming for students. The other concern was the desire to get the Southern Plains offices into the building with the programs.
- c. The SPEC Board assigned a facilities committee of Wendi Russenberger, Jesse Haugh, and Bryan Nowicki. They were part of option discussions; however, Bryan Nowicki was unable to attend the primary discussion and Mike Pfeil attended in his place. One option was to add on to Lincoln and one was to keep the current size within Lincoln and rent additional spaces.

- d. The official redesign of Lincoln has not been completed. That will be completed after the Kraus-Anderson agreement is approved and an architect is hired.
- e. The fine-tuned details of the design will involve all of the stakeholders. Anyone that is interested in participating should contact Sarah Mittelstadt (sarah.mittelstadt@southernplainsedcoop.org or 507-238-1472)

4. Who came up with the \$10,600,000 estimate to complete each of the projects listed above?

Gary Benson from Kraus-Anderson. Gary was also part of the facilities study done by Springsted in 2014. He has worked on several other projects completed by Cooperatives/Ed Districts/Intermediate Districts.

5. What happens when the cost of the rehabilitation comes in greater than the \$10,600,000?

Other projects within the renovation and remodeling will need to be reduced.

6. What happens when the cost of the project goes under the amount budgeted?

Any excess funds will be used to pay off the bonds quicker.

7. How can you assure us that you are not going for all of the bells and whistles?

- a. I encourage anyone with concerns to join in on discussions regarding the facilities; please contact Sarah Mittelstadt at sarah.mittelstadt@southernplainsedcoop.org or 507-238-1472. I can assure you that the Southern Plains staff and special education staff within member districts have worked hard to reduce spending. We have demonstrated the ability to work conservatively. This is evidenced by the following data:

	2009-10	2015-16
Total Special Ed Expenditures in member districts	\$6,523,379	\$5,900,286
Average of Member District Budget spent on Special Ed while the state average increased from 17.7 to 18.23	15.033	12.975
Average Expenditures per ADM on Special Ed	\$1,566	\$1,554

- b. Our goal is to find adequate facilities at a level consistent with member districts. We are not looking for anything extra. We have looked at facilities with “extra fluff”, and we cannot even imagine asking for that of our tax payers.

8. Why is the ALC director’s office on the first floor while the ALC program is on the second floor?

The Administrative Coordinator oversees all of the programs within the building; she is regularly available. There is a social worker on the second floor that works closely with the ALC.

9. The *Fairmont Sentinel* indicated that it would take \$5 million to renovate Winnebago. Why don’t you renovate Winnebago?

During the interview with the Sentinel there was no discussion about the costs to renovate Winnebago. We believe that the number that was quoted was from an article when Blue Earth Area “closed” the Winnebago building three years ago. That number was an estimate Blue Earth Area had done several years before that article just to get the basics done to get the building up to code. However, the number was outdated at the time of the article three years ago. That cost has

increased since that time. Additionally, renovation would need to occur to get the building to meet the needs of the Southern Plains Alternative Programs.

10. The Alternative Programs moved to Winnebago three years ago; how do we know that you won't want to move again in a few years?

It was very clear at the time we moved into Winnebago that it was a temporary solution to help provide space in a time in which we had no other alternatives. The only reasons we have moved around was to find space that suited the needs of the students. Once a suitable building is completed, there would be no need to move. The facilities study completed by Springsted in 2014 recommended Fairmont due to the location.

11. What happens if we do not pass the resolution at this time?

We will need to continue to put “patches” on the facility within Winnebago. There are several items that are getting to a significant point where costs will rise significantly. For example, there is a coil out in an air handler in the roof that will result in significant costs. The ventilation system is very hard to manage and will need to be replaced soon. The tuck pointing also needs to be addressed or moisture will start entering the building. There are several flooding issues that are causing significant sewer smells at various times in the school building. These costs will need to be billed back to the resident districts; this will need to come from the general fund.

If the Winnebago building becomes uninhabitable, the member districts maintain responsibility for the students. Southern Plains will work to develop programs within member districts to meet student needs.

12. What is the outlook for the programs in the future? Will there be continued needs?

The following shows the trends in enrollment:

	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014	2012-2013	2011-2012
ALC	42	35	38	33	36	45	48
Bridges	38	42	21	20	13	13	10
PALS	5	6	7	9	9	9	9
Pathways	0	0	4	2	0	0	0
TOTAL	85	83	70	64	58	67	67

An analysis was done of the early childhood students (ages birth-5) currently receiving services. It appears as though needs will continue to rise based on these numbers. 11 students were identified as strong potential referrals for referral by the third grade. These only include potential referrals to the Bridges and PALS programs. Approximately half of the students in the Bridges program actually received services in Early Childhood; the other students were later identified or moved into the area.

13. What does research state about the need for this space?

There are two architectural firms that have conducted studies of similar programs. Here are their recommendations:

- Additional focus is needed on a practical and sensory level so students can flourish.
- Need additional space with comfortable distance and safe places to calm down.

- Routes around classroom need to minimize travel time.
- Need access to quiet space within a close distance to the main teaching space.
- Space is needed for children to move with easy access to what they need.
- Students need access to individual and group learning spaces.
- Therapy rooms make a considerable contribution to the classroom by supporting the student's health, well-being, and enabling access to learning.
- Good storage options need to support effective teaching and learning activities.

The Stable Company

- 64 immersive observations showed “breakout rooms, sensory rooms, community pods, and swing rooms reduce the amount of disruption to others in the classroom and help students de-escalate in privacy.”
- Additionally, there was a 75% reduction in seclusion as a result of having spaces that met student needs.

BWBR Architects

“Research indicates that the classroom should be designed to minimize crowding and distraction. Crowding at home and school can have a negative impact on behavior (Maxwell, 1996). The simplest way to *minimize crowding* is to increase the amount of space in a classroom. Burgess and Fordyce (1989) found that when children had more space, they increased their interpersonal distances and their interactions with peers, teachers, and parents regardless of room design.” (Simonsen, et al. 2008)

14. **Why are we seeing such a huge increase in needs?**

Previously many of these students would have been hospitalized. We have many students we service that are awaiting hospitalization, are too young for this kind of treatment, or are “too severe” for a hospitalization.

The State of Minnesota, Office of Ombudsman for Mental Health shared their views:

- We have a shortage of (mental health) services that is significantly compounded by a rapidly increasing demand.
- No inpatient psychiatric beds are available when a patient is in crisis and in need of hospitalization.
- A regular in-patient hospital bed is not the best place for a child, but there is a critical lack of crisis services available.
- Concerns rose that some patients are discharged due to lack of beds despite the need for inpatient hospitalization.
- Hospitals are closing down mental health units. Reimbursement rates are not sufficient for hospitals to continue to provide services.
- Mentally ill citizens in need of services are often advised they are not sick enough to receive services.
- Parents are told to call police when a child with a serious emotional disturbance is in crisis.

Additional studies on Mental Health:

- The accessibility to resources is very limited in rural Minnesota (Center for Rural Policy and Development, May 2017)
- The state hospital beds have decreased by 97% since 1955 (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2016).

15. Can't we just make "those kids" step up and go to a regular school?

- a. Federal and State laws require that districts provide a "continuum of alternate placements", including "instruction in regular classes, special classes, **special schools**, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions." 34 CFR 300.115(b)(2)
- b. Students with emotional disabilities have an "invisible" handicap. "There are some real myths surrounding the etiology of their disability of control...over their handicap." But the students have genuine needs that must be addressed. Many have very high anxiety about returning to an environment that was not equipped to meet their needs (their previously enrolled district) (Behavior Advisor).

16. How does the space impact staff?

In the past 5 years there were 24 staff injuries as a result of space. Although these injuries will not completely be eliminated, they will be reduced as a result of space designed to meet student needs. Examples of injuries included preventing a student from locking himself in the safe, escorting students to safe locations, a staff member being pushed down the stairs, etc.

17. Since you are spending so much on a building, why not just build a new building?

A new building was listed as over \$17 million. Districts would not have enough lease levy authority to pay for a new building. Additionally, new construction rarely is to the degree of durability that we find in the Lincoln building.

18. How long as the Lincoln building been empty? What kind of damage is done as a result of it being empty and unheated?

The Lincoln building has been empty since June. We are in the process of getting a building in section to determine if there was any damage from the building being unheated. At this point it does not appear as though there was anything significant.

19. Why not just renovate the building and add on later if needed?

The addition is estimated at \$1.6 million. In order to add an elevator and accessible restrooms in the original building, there would be additional costs of about \$500,000. This results in only \$1.1 million increase for the cost of the addition. If the addition were to be added in future years, you can anticipate a 5-10% increase because of the reduced "efficiency" of doing the project at one time with the renovation. Estimates are also that renovation costs increase 4% per year.

20. **Since 30% of the costs are based on how much districts “use” the programs, what will happen when there are no students in the programs? Won’t districts all start their own school-within-a-school?**

It would be a wonderful program if there weren’t students within the programs. Our goal is always to keep students within mainstream schools as much as possible; however, there do not appear to be a reduction in needs. It also should be noted that the ALC is a small portion of the usage of the building. The bulk of the building is used for Setting IV special education programs.