

SCENARIO: OVERLOOK

THE AREA

Overlook School District serves two suburban towns in a Rocky Mountain metropolitan area.

The town of Overlook sits on the southern boundary of the central city of Nicholson. It is a fully developed, first-growth suburb featuring single-family ranch houses and bungalows built in the 1960s. It has long been a stable community of middle-income families, many of them union workers in the region's aeronautics and petrochemical industries. In the last five years, though, urban problems of blight and drug crime have begun to seep over the city line. The commercial corridors closest to Nicholson have become a little frayed, dotted with vacant storefronts.

South Lake Township lies to the south of Overlook. When the consolidated school district was formed in the 1960s, the township was lightly populated. Its main claim to fame was as the home of the regional airport; businesses clustered around its runways, but few middle-class homebuyers clamored for properties in its flight paths.

The closing of the airport in 1992, as a modern international airport opened to the northeast of the city, brought major, rapid change to South Lake. First, part of the airport property was successfully converted into a technology campus; the influx of high-tech employees created strong demand for upper-end townhouses and houses in the area around nearby Redrun Lake.

Then the rest of the airport property was sold to a consortium of developers who undertook a hugely ambitious "smart-growth" plan. The plan is now in the 10th year of a planned 20-year buildout that will eventually add a total of 6,000 households, three corporate campuses, four large parks and four different retail centers to South Lake. The development, called Maxwell Hills, is hugely popular and has driven up housing values throughout the township.

Overlook is traditionally Democratic. South Lake is a strongly Republican township. The differences tend to lend an edge to Overlook School District affairs.

THE SCHOOLS

The Overlook School District serves 13,000 students. Three quarters of its school building are in Overlook, rather than South Lake. The most problematic right now is Overlook High School – a meandering, multileveled, steel frame and curtain wall building opened in 1958 and expanded three times since, the most recent project being a two-story science laboratory wing opened in 2000.

Overlook High has a perimeter of 1,200 yards; it can take 8-10 minutes to walk from one end to the other. Even so, it is very crowded. With 2,900 students in grades 9-12, it has operated for several years above its stated capacity of 2,700. Two separate clusters of temporary classrooms sit in the rear parking lot between the school and its athletic fields. One cluster houses the foreign language faculty; the other special education classrooms. Also, band, choir and studio art rooms are used for regular classes for half of the day.

The original school building surrounded a central grass courtyard. The courtyard has been off limits to students for several years, thanks to a rise in scuffles and other disciplinary problems in the space as the student body grew more diverse and crowding grew more extreme. Faculty members complain that the school's long, narrow, noisy and echoing corridors are hard to survey and patrol, and that students with unfriendly schedules often can't make it from one class to another in time. The school's size leads most kids not to use their lockers, hauling their books around in huge backpacks, which make the halls seem more crowded and offer plenty of opportunities to bring forbidden materials into the school. One recent principal tried to ban backpacks and bookbags, but an outcry forced her to back down.

As the tendency of students to drive to school has risen over the years, the parking crunch has become extreme. Only seniors are given a crack, via lottery, at whatever remains of the schools 400 spaces after faculty and staff are taken care of. Students tend to park on neighboring side streets, bringing endless complaints from residents.

THE COMMUNITY CONTROVERSY

It has been clear for several years to the Overlook school board and many parents that something had to be done to alleviate the crowding at the high school. Test scores at Overlook were stagnant, and signs of turbulence, including fights, truancy and dropouts, were up.

Growth in the South Lake part of the district was projected to bring the district's population of likely public high school students up to 3,200 within five years and 3,800 within 10.

Yet nothing has been done, thanks to the pincer effect of two factors: sharp community disagreements about what remedies to try, and the impact of a strict cap on state spending implemented via voter referendum five years ago.

Five years ago, a consultant presented the school board with three options for dealing with high school crowding:

- 1) Building a separate ninth-grade academy, with a capacity of 900, on part of the Overlook campus. This option would use up about half of the school's playing fields.
- 2) Taking an old junior high school on the Overlook-South Lake border that had been leased as commercial office space for the last 15 years and renovating it into a second, 1,500-student high school serving primarily South Lake students.
- 3) Building a new high school for 1,500 students in the high-growth part of South Lake.

Each option had its proponents, and its equally vociferous foes. The newer, affluent residents of South Lake clamored for the new school, pointing to the hardship that daily commutes of 45 minutes or more exacted on their kids, who often had to catch buses before dawn. They favored building a modern, fully wired, technologically advanced school in their township, whose students could take advantage of proximity to the successful computer engineering firms at the technology campus nearby.

Many Overlook residents opposed that idea as extravagant and inequitable, decrying the snobbery and selfishness of the South Lake contingent. But they split on their favored remedy. The renovation was the cheapest option, and was favored by taxpayer groups.

The ninth grade option was favored by fans of Overlook's legendary sports program; the Gophers had won state titles in football and basketball in recent years. They worried that breaking up the student body into two schools would end that athletic dominance. They didn't like losing the playing fields, but pledged a community campaign to raise money to replace them.

South Lake parents threatened to seek a breakup of the district if either the ninth-grade or renovation options were approved.

Turmoil over the issue has divided and paralyzed the school district for five years, leading to frequent turnover on the school board. All the while, all three options had become increasingly unaffordable for Overlook, given the way the state cap limited possible aid. Locally, a big factor was the growing influence of a vocal citizens group, the Overlook Alliance, which opposed any school

property tax hikes and campaigned fiercely for a back-to-basics, core knowledge approach to education.

But this year, several factors have loosened the stalemate while complicating the issue.

First, at the behest of a new governor, voters agreed to a loosening of the state spending cap; one effect of that was the unfreezing of a program offering state aid for school construction.

Second, the state passed a much more liberal charter school law, which would send to charters a per-student subsidy nearly as high (90 percent) as the home district gets, plus a small subsidy for construction or renovation costs.

Third, the developer consortium building Maxwell Hills made an unusual offer. Seeing the potential that the festering school dispute had to limit housing values in their smart-growth community, they offered to begin a new-school fund, donating \$5 per square foot for every home sold in Maxwell Hills from Jan. 1, 2005 forward. About 4,000 units remain to be sold in the smart-growth plan. The only catch: any new schools receiving money from the fund have to be built in Maxwell Hills, on land chosen by and leased from the developers.

Fourth, Shelton Duvall, the founder and president of Dynatech, the leading software firm from the technology campus, had chosen education reform as the focus of his new philanthropy. Following Bill Gates' lead, he gave a highly publicized speech to the Nicholson Chamber of Commerce, decrying "cells and bells," factory-style school design and dull curriculums that don't teach students the analytical and collaborative skills demanded in his field.

Duvall offered the school district a \$1 million challenge grant to the Overlook district to design an innovative high school program that would stress project-based learning and externships at local companies and nonprofits.

YOUR WORK TODAY

Imagine that you are a citizen panel set up by the beaten and battered Overlook school board; you've all been chosen for your varied expertise and civic spirit. The board is looking for your advice on the Overlook High School problem. In particular, it wants input on the following issues. You may add others you find important:

- Are the options in the previous consultant's report adequate? If so, which option would you adopt and why? If not, please generate a new set of options. Be clear about what standards for appropriate school size undergird your options. Also consider

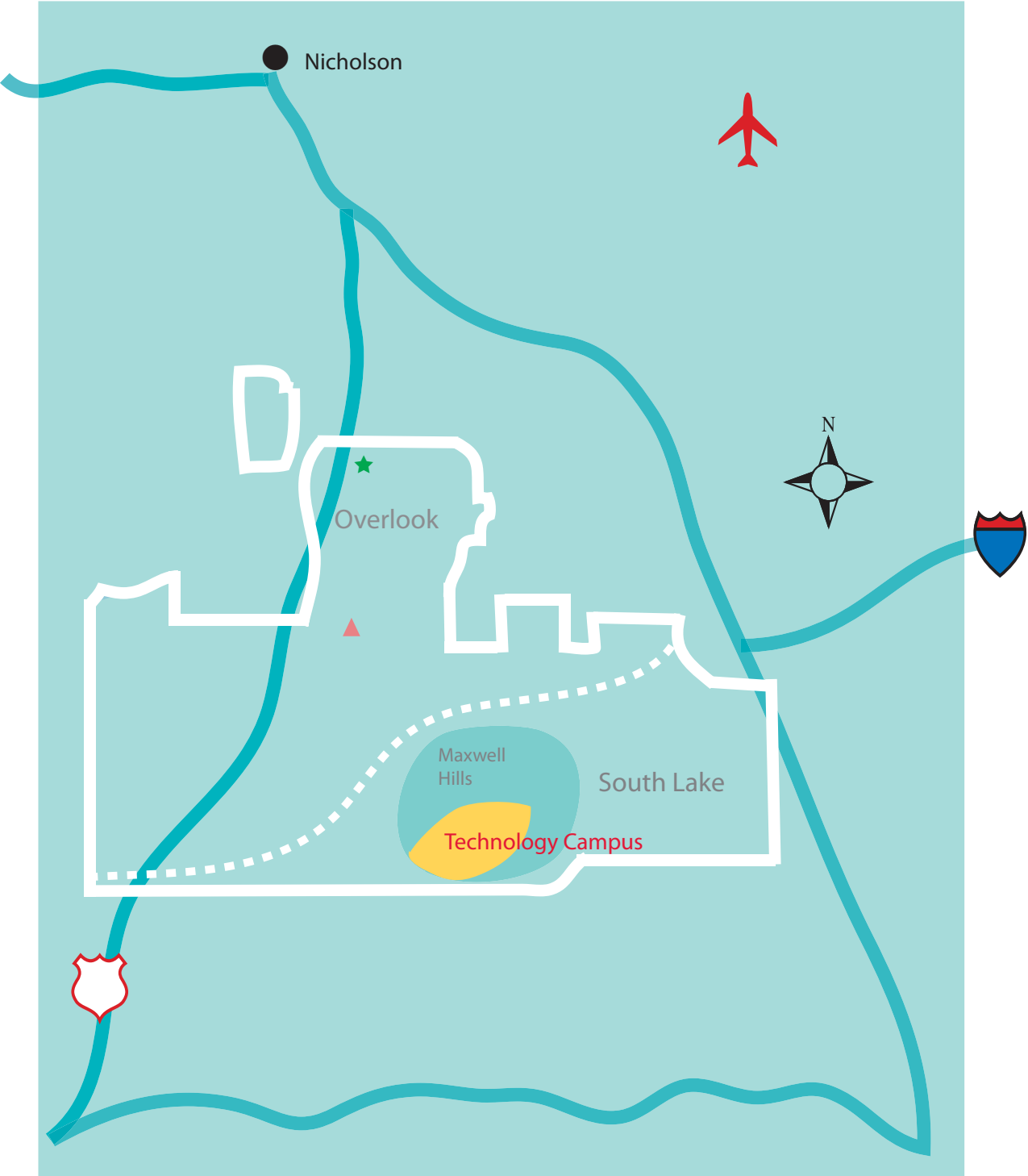
what use, if any, Overlook should make of the charter law or other non-traditional approaches.

- How should Overlook respond to the offer from the Maxwell Hills development consortium? If the offer is worth considering, but not adequate in of itself, what counterproposals for a district-developer partnership should Overlook make?
- How should Overlook respond to Shelton Duvall's offer? What ideas do you have for designing the kind of high school program he seeks? Can you give the district some advice on how to balance his vision for school design and learning with the back to basics leanings of the Overlook Alliance?
- Whatever else is done, Overlook High likely will remain in use. What ideas do you have for how its design and materials could be altered to create a better learning environment?
- How can the various community concerns at play in this scenario – from intradistrict equity to sports teams to tax bills – be aired in a way that leads to solutions, not division?

For each of these challenges, you can suggest several possible strategies or solutions. Do not get hung up seeking the one perfect solution. With each suggested solution, be honest and clear about the tradeoffs it entails. And wherever possible, offer examples of real places where your ideas have been tried successfully.

Good luck. Have fun. Be creative. In talking through this scenario, please do not change any of its basic facts, but feel free to go beyond the stated situation to introduce ideas or players who could help bring about a good result – as long as the additions are realistic.

Overlook School District



1 mile

- District Lines
- Highways
- Cultural Institutions
- City Center
- Middle School
- High School

Overlook School District Facts

	Overlook	South Lake
Adult Education Levels	2004	2004
Adults with a High School Diploma (%)	82.6	93.5
Adults with a Bachelor's Degree (%)	20.2	45.8
Household Characteristics		
Number of Households	23,478	15,663
Single-Parent Households with Children (%)	10.2	7.7
Income and Wealth (\$)		
Median Household Income	40,944	66,333
Income Per Person	21,828	35,664
Median Home Value	141,689	195,415
Household Income Distribution (%)		
Less than \$15,000	14.3	6.5
\$15,000-\$29,999	20.6	10.9
\$30,000-\$49,999	25.9	18.7
\$50,000-\$74,999	21.7	20.1
\$75,000-\$99,999	9.7	15.2
\$100,000-\$149,999	6.3	17.1
\$150,000 or More	1.5	11.6
Population		
Population	51,034	28,079
Population Density	9,702	3,426
Median Age	38	41
Population Distribution by Age (%)		
4 Years or Younger	5.8	5.7
5-19 Years	17.5	20.9
20-44 Years	37.4	29.6
45-64 Years	23.4	30.1
65 Years or Older	15.9	13.8
Enrollment of Racial/Ethnic Groups	2004	2004
White (%)	65.8	85.3
Black (%)	4.4	2.1
Hispanic (%)	25.3	9
Asian/Pacific Islander (%)	1.8	3
American Indian/Alaska Native (%)	2.6	0.7
Economically Disadvantaged (%)	33.5	11.2
English Language Learners (%)	5.6	4.9
Students with Disabilities (%)	13	10.4
Migrant (%)	0	0
Female (%)	47.5	49.2
Male (%)	52.5	50.8

Overlook School District Facts

	Overlook	South Lake
How Students Performed on State Reading Tests	2004	2004
Grade 3 Reading Proficiency (%)	87.3	95.2
Grade 4 Reading Proficiency (%)	88.0	94.0
Grade 5 Reading Proficiency (%)	88.0	95.0
Grade 6 Reading Proficiency (%)	90.0	93.0
Grade 7 Reading Proficiency (%)	84.0	92.0
Grade 8 Reading Proficiency (%)	88.0	93.0
Grade 9 Reading Proficiency (%)	87.0	94.0
Grade 10 Reading Proficiency (%)	88.0	94.0
How Students Performed on State Math Tests		
Grade 5 Math Proficiency (%)	85.0	96.0
Grade 6 Math Proficiency (%)	79.0	89.0
Grade 7 Math Proficiency (%)	79.0	85.0
Grade 8 Math Proficiency (%)	76.0	82.0
Grade 9 Math Proficiency (%)	57.0	79.0
Grade 10 Math Proficiency (%)	53.0	76.0
How Students Performed on State Science Tests		
Grade 8 Science Proficiency (%)	77.0	88.0
How Students Performed on State Writing Tests		
Grade 3 Writing Proficiency (%)	93.0	98.0
Grade 4 Writing Proficiency (%)	94.0	97.0
Grade 5 Writing Proficiency (%)	94.0	98.0
Grade 6 Writing Proficiency (%)	95.0	95.0
Grade 7 Writing Proficiency (%)	91.0	96.0
Grade 8 Writing Proficiency (%)	90.0	96.0
Grade 9 Writing Proficiency (%)	95.0	96.0
Grade 10 Writing Proficiency (%)	89.0	94.0
Overlook District Overview		
Number of Students	16,408	8,400
Number of Schools	24	9

High School Facts

	Overlook HS
How Students Performed on State Reading Tests	2004
Grade 9 Reading Proficiency (%)	87.0
Grade 10 Reading Proficiency (%)	86.0
How Students Performed on State Math Tests	
Grade 9 Math Proficiency (%)	67.0
Grade 10 Math Proficiency (%)	57.0
How Students Performed on State Writing Tests	
Grade 9 Writing Proficiency (%)	95.0
Grade 10 Writing Proficiency (%)	87.0
Enrollment of Racial/Ethnic Groups	2004
White (%)	73.5
Black (%)	3.7
Hispanic (%)	18.0
Asian/Pacific Islander (%)	2.3
American Indian/Alaska Native (%)	2.6
Enrollment of Students with Special Needs	
Economically Disadvantaged (%)	21.8
Enrollment Distribution by Gender	
Female (%)	47.4
Male (%)	52.6
Total Enrollment	2,900