

Press Clippings - 12/15/2023

- Daily Herald-

Elgin school board confronts aging buildings and inequality during tour

By: James Fuller

December 14, 2023

Noisy classrooms that only have temporary walls as a buffer. Ceilings so low a person standing 5 feet 4 inches tall can touch them. Impassable stairways that hinder access for students in wheelchairs or using crutches.

Bad plumbing. No green space.

Those were some of the most visible challenges for the elementary schools in Elgin Area **School District U-46** when school board members took a four-hour tour on a recent school day.

The purpose was to assess the limitations and inequities of the buildings as the board is poised to decide which classes to remodel, which schools to rebuild and which buildings to shutter.

Recommendations for the fate of eight schools will come next week.

District staff used the tour, and a presentation by U-46 Chief of Staff Brian Lindholm, to provide insight into the factors that will drive the plan.

Some elementary schools date to the late 1800s. Others suffer from outdated designs from the 1970s, forcing students to walk through supply rooms or disrupt other classes to reach other parts of the building.

Some schools targeted for rebuilding in earlier discussions, such as McKinley, Lowrie and Parkwood, face the logistical problem of sitting on a tight space or poor water drainage, complicating and potentially increasing the cost and disruption of reconstruction in their current locations.

Schools on much larger plots, such as Century Oaks and Glenbrook, have strong enrollments that make a case for ongoing use, in some form, compared to most of the district's other elementary schools with declining populations.

School board members expressed concern about the number of stairs, narrow bathrooms and other accessibility challenges. That topic may have a strong influence on the board's decisions on how to spend construction dollars as district staff agreed accessibility is a factor in their upcoming recommendations.

- Village of Bartlett - Groundbreaking Held at Hawk Hollow School



Village President Kevin Wallace attended a groundbreaking ceremony on Thursday, 12/7, to mark the start of construction to convert Hawk Hollow from an elementary school into a middle school. Once complete, the building will serve the southeast portion of School District U-46's attendance area and play an important role in the district's shift to a true middle school model, in which 6th graders - who currently attend elementary school in U-46 - will join 7th and 8th graders.

The groundbreaking ceremony outside the building was attended by U-46 Superintendent Dr. Suzanne Johnson, members of her cabinet, Board of Education President Sue Kerr, the remaining members of the school board, and elected officials, including Wallace, Village of Bartlett Trustee Dan Gunsteen and State Senator Seth Lewis. Several area families whose young children attended Hawk Hollow as elementary students, and who will likely attend it as middle school students, were at the event as well.

During her remarks to the gathering, Dr. Johnson said that the Hawk Hollow conversion is one step in a process that began in early 2020 with U-46's work to develop an Educational Facility Master Plan, followed by the Unite U-46 community engagement initiative, and the passage of a \$179 million bond proposal in April 2023.

"Thank you to our students, staff, parents, and community members who helped us develop a thoughtful master plan that will support our future, and those who participated in our Unite U-46 efforts to develop recommendations to move our schools forward," Dr. Johnson said. "We will continue to invest in our

facilities to provide equitable access to learning environments that will support academic success for all students.”

Board President Sue Kerr explained the “teaming” model that U-46 will move to for its middle schools, starting with the 2026-27 school year. Students are grouped in smaller grade-level teams of about 100 to 125 students. Each team has the same group of core academic teachers who meet consistently to collaborate and provide better opportunities for student learning and stronger teacher-student relationships.

“When U-46 decided to move 6th graders out of elementary school and into middle school, we realized it was also a great opportunity to fill a gap. The southeast portion of our district had no middle school,” she said. “By converting Hawk Hollow into a middle school, we’ll be able to welcome 6th, 7th, and 8th grades to a modern facility that provides space to support teaching and learning today and in the future.”

Hawk Hollow, built in 2002, last served as an elementary school for the 2022-23 school year. Its students were then welcomed by two neighboring schools, Spring Trail Elementary School in Carol Stream and Prairieview Elementary School in Bartlett.

As an elementary school, Hawk Hollow was about 58,000 square feet. To transform it into a middle school designed to serve about 750 students, an approximately 92,000-square-foot addition will be constructed. The renovated building will include a media center with a maker space, a collaboration center, a cafeteria featuring a stage for performances, flexible laboratory spaces, two gymnasiums, and a fitness room.

“The result will be a state-of-the-art middle school to serve our community, and over the next year and a half, you will see that project come together,” said Deputy Superintendent of Operations Dr. Ann Williams.

The approximately \$58 million cost to convert Hawk Hollow is being funded by reserves and was approved by the Board of Education before the bond proposal passed.

Bartlett Village Board President Kevin Wallace said that improving the quality of school buildings benefits residents by protecting the investment they have in their homes and a community’s property values.

“But most importantly, renovations, additions, and improvements at Hawk Hollow will benefit many future generations of students,” he said. “The reinvented Hawk Hollow school will provide students with dynamic spaces for learning, ample room for state of the art technology, and will greatly impact student success for many years to come.”

Also, as part of the shift to a true middle school model, U-46 plans to build a new middle school in Elgin. The District has a purchase and sale agreement with the owners of a 12.4-acre property adjacent to Hilltop Elementary School in Elgin where a new middle school could be located.

The Board of Education also approved new additions to Kimball Middle School in Elgin and Kenyon Woods Middle School in South Elgin, allowing them each to educate about 1,250 students. Because of declining enrollment and the prohibitive costs of updating the buildings, the district plans to retire Abbott and Ellis middle schools in Elgin but make updates to its remaining middle schools of Tefft, Canton, Eastview, and Larsen.

A video about the groundbreaking is available on U-46's YouTube channel.