



## RSU #24 Students Deserve a New Facility

In August of 2016, I received a phone call from the Maine Department of Education Commissioner, William Beardsley, inquiring about the interest in a possible new high school project to replace Sumner Memorial High School. With great excitement and enthusiasm, I informed the RSU Board of the phone call and there began a very complicated and time intensive, but also a very rewarding journey.

After our initial presentation to the Construction Subcommittee of the Maine State Board of Education, we were granted permission to move forward in the process. In the February 15, 2017 letter granting permission to proceed, the subcommittee recommended that we “build a school that can house other grades, in addition to grades 9 through 12”.

That began a process that included advertising for architectural services and ultimately hiring PDT Architects. This was followed by a series of meetings with staff at the Department of Education (DOE) to begin determining what the State would be willing to fund. In addition, an educational consultant was hired to lead a process of educational visioning work with each of our school communities. There were meetings held at Sumner Memorial High School, Cave Hill School, Mountain View, Peninsula, and Ella Lewis. Although there were questions and concerns expressed about the concept of having students of varying age groups in the same building, there was never any opposition and, in the end, support for the project was evident at these meetings. Part of the visioning process included working with student groups from each school, who were also supportive (and excited) about the project.

At the same time, our architects were engaged in a number of studies required by DOE as part of its normal project review process. One study was a New vs. Renovation analysis which assessed the condition of the existing structure and presented the DOE with options and costs for improvements. The second was an analysis of other buildings in the district to determine their physical condition and educational program potential and limitations.

In addition, we had, and continue to have, Building Committee and Subcommittee meetings. The Subcommittees include: Athletics and Physical Education; Energy and Sustainability; Arts and Performance; and Technology and Industrial Arts. Each meeting was open to the public, and input received from attendees was considered in the decision making process. Attendance and Minutes for all of these meetings are available on the RSU 24 website ([www.rsu24.org](http://www.rsu24.org)).

At a Board meeting on February 6, 2018, the Board of Directors discussed at length the merits and challenges of including additional grades in the project. Ultimately, they voted unanimously to include grades 6-8 as part of the new building project, agreeing that it truly is in the best interest of our district to build a state of the art facility.

It is important to note that there are tremendous benefits that will be realized through this new building project. In addition to having a brand new facility with state of the art technology and adequate space for our student body, the plan includes a performance area with seating for 300 people, 2 gymnasiums, and an updated Technology Shop (Industrial Arts).

We believe there are also specific benefits for the middle school population that will enrich the overall learning experience for this part of our student body. These benefits include:

- Access to higher level courses within the shared facility (Geometry, English 9, etc.)
- Access to full cohorts of learners who are interested in similar learning experiences (rather than being one student learning online), and have access to a real teacher
- Authentic learning experiences in learning spaces designed for the specific instruction (science labs, art rooms, collaboration spaces, maker spaces, etc.)
- Access to enrichment courses such as World Language, Industrial Arts, Band, Chorus, Show Choir and Health
- Development of a “Pathways” program for middle-level students. Research and data show that it is this time in a learner’s academic career when they become disengaged and disenfranchised - a Pathways program at this level could be life-changing.
- Access to a state-of-the-art Learning Commons (library) that offers a rich student-centered atmosphere and offers a variety of learning materials
- Access to a large fitness center not only as part of physical education courses, but also as part of after-school programming and for healthy lifestyle choices
- Access to safe and appropriate learning spaces both indoors and outdoors rather than in the current classrooms, spaces, and fields which often have been retrofitted to address facility needs.

Due to combined numbers and being in a centrally-located facility, middle-level students will have the ability to participate in

- a variety of athletics, offering not only health benefits but opportunities for collaboration, time-management, leadership and the establishment of a strong high school feeder program
- co-curricular activities such as robotics, civil rights team, art club, and more, which offer opportunities for collaboration, problem solving, and development of leadership skills
- work with community partners on a more frequent basis (job shadowing, career explorations, etc.)

I completely understand the concern and anxiety that could come about as a result of combining our middle school and high school grade spans in one facility. These concerns will be addressed as part of the transition to the new facility. As a school district, we will do our best to be prepared and to create a seamless transition between the old structure and the new one. We will work with our educators and listen to our students and our parents to create a transition plan that respects the unique needs of the various grades. We will do what we need to do to make sure this amazing opportunity is maximized for our students and our community.

The state will be paying for 99.4% of this project. As a result, there is a very scripted and time-consuming procedure. With the support of PDT Architects and the Maine

Department of Education, we have worked our way through this process, which includes a number of “checks and balances” to ensure that we are getting the facility that meets the needs of our students but within a specific set of criteria and expectations. As part of the process, we will have invested \$600,000 in local funds for a variety of permits and studies. A successful referendum will allow the school district to be reimbursed that initial investment.

I would be remiss if I didn't thank the numerous people who devoted a great deal of time and energy into this project. Whether serving on the Building Committee, on one of the subcommittees, attending one of the visioning sessions or providing input individually, your contribution is greatly appreciated.

The referendum vote for the new school project will take place on June 11 at the local voting stations. A successful referendum vote would allow for construction to start in the fall of 2020 (projected) and have students entering the halls of the new school in September of 2022.

Having worked at Sumner as both a teacher and an administrator, I have seen first-hand the condition of the building and the limitations that are in place as a result of an aged facility. I believe our communities share a value in “doing the best we can with what we have” and that is what we have been doing for many years. We are now in a position to change what “we have” and create a better learning environment for over half of our students. RSU #24 students are deserving of a new facility and I hope you will join with me in providing it for them.

Sincerely,

Michael Eastman, RSU 24 Superintendent of Schools