

## THE NEXT BIG STEP FOR CLINTON EDUCATION

**By Brenden West** \* *A Herald Assistant Editor*

CLINTON — Ideas for how to reinvent the Clinton Middle School system began in the mid-1990s. Back then, Superintendent Deb Olson said, it was about identifying how the Clinton School District could bring buildings up to today's standards of education. Those were preliminary talks, and the districts community task force was unsure how to approach growing the school, or even when those plans would take specific form.

"It's been a long process where this has happened," Olson said. "A community group came together to really look at the future of our buildings and where we were going. How were we going to meet the needs of our kids?"

Enhanced education is a priority for the district. Olson said she and the board will always look ahead for ways to grow Clintons main educational branch.

However, the middle school wasn't the first priority for the task force and plans evolved over time. Should the district focus on upgrading Lyons and Washington Middle Schools or combine them into one?

What grades fit into a conjoined middle school? Will the public be on board with the ideas the district sets forth?

Before the district turned its whole attention to those plans, the main concerns were addressing elementary schools — remodeling Whittier and reopening Bluff and later building Eagle Heights and Jefferson elementaries. After that, facility upgrades at Clinton High School took precedence.

Now, more than 15 years after middle school alterations were identified, Olson said the district is on the cusp of finalizing the task force's ultimate vision. For the first time in Clintons history, middle school students will join as one. Being on that verge makes this school year a reward for the administration.

"It was one of those final pieces we needed to move forward," Olson said. "Our group overwhelmingly wanted to build C one school. It really took a long time for us to come to consensus. What they decided was coming together was going to be a really good thing. "We're finally at a point in time where I can honestly say all of our buildings are where we need them to be."

It became apparent early on to decision-makers that the most sustainable option was to bring both middle schools together. Olson said renovating one or the other was strongly considered, but ultimately the districts task force noted that the older outdated confines of Lyons and Washington would need continual upkeep before declining again to the state they are in today — in need of major revisions. While new schools maintain a large price tag — Clinton Middle School cost estimates are at \$21 million — their conjoining proved the more cost-effective solution.

"There were plans to either renovate both buildings or build a die school," Olson said. "It wasn't something entered into lightly... Being able to provide the amenities you can get in a new building could

be provided better than a renovated space. What we can offer for kids was so much more for the new school than either of the two that existed.”

After making a combined middle school the mission, the next question important was where? Olson said a number of locations were considered. But the site that prevailed — the west side of 13th Avenue North — presented a number of solutions.

Foremost, it was a way to centralize the middle school. Of all the considerable locations, Olson said the final spot is in the heart of the city, which satisfies multiple community desires.

“People see it coming off 13th Avenue North,” she said. “It hits you right in the face. It benefits everybody in our community because it benefits our kids.”

The next consideration came to the building itself. The district partnered with FRK Architects for the design and Estes Construction to manage the project. Multiple local partners were also recruited.

The facility will offer features not seen in either of the current middle schools. For one, safety considerations make it so all visitors have to enter the building through the front office. The gymnasium will have seating for athletic events. Classrooms were built with the districts “innovation laboratory” approach in mind (featured currently at Clinton High). For the arts, students will have a 21st century space specifically designed to encourage band and choir instruction.

David Briden, lead architect from FRK, said there also are numerous efficiencies with the building that make “wise use of dollars.”

“The open floor plan allows visual and physical connections between the various curricular areas and fosters a collaborative environment for the students and staff,” Briden said via email. “Strategic introduction of natural light into the central core of the building provides these spaces with a connection to the exterior while also serving to make the building more energy efficient by reducing artificial light requirements.”

Adding to that efficiency is geothermal heating and cooling.

“The building is also designed to provide a secure setting for students,” Briden added, “And it incorporates the latest concepts of innovative spaces and technology to enhance the learning environment for the students of Clinton.”

This school is a place that does more than cap off a long held district vision. Years before the district even broke ground on the facility, middle school administration began making attempts to unify staff and students from both Lyons and Washington.

Dan Boyd, who was the Lyons MS principal before being appointed CMS principal last year, said years of thought, planning and alignment have been poured into successfully uniting both schools. All of it points to the buzzword circulating both schools these days — “Collaboration.”

“Everybody found out we were more similar than dissimilar,” Boyd said. “We did some very purposeful things for staff to be able to get to know each other....”

Lyons and Washington — now referred to as CMS “North” and “South” campuses — formed building leadership teams specifically to tackle any barriers that may have been built between the two schools. Aligning curriculum was an obvious task, but so too were objectives to harmoniously transition two student bodies into one.

Teachers who had never previously worked together were also challenged to become better co-workers.

For Eric Brown, middle and high school math teacher and member of the building leadership team, the process started by delving into educational theory and evolved into specific teaching objectives.

After years of working between the two schools, he’s confident they are ready to become one.

“Back when we started merging, the building was just an idea,” Brown said, adding it’s “amazing” to see it take physical form now.

“At first we started exploring theories of change — how to anticipate and plan for it. Then we developed action plans, broke off into subcommittees for what needs to happen to physically move these buildings together.

“A theme that emerged through the whole thing was relationship building.”

After construction delays set back the opening of CMS by four months, it presented another dilemma to staff. School started with North and South campus students maintaining campus-specific teachers; all after school activities have been combined for years.

But would the administration continue to segregate both student bodies in their classrooms with a mid-year transition to the new facility? To Boyd, the answer was almost immediately “no.” He said both bodies are ready to become one.

“Kids don’t know any different,” Boyd said. “There’s no boundaries between groups. We have kids that are involved in athletic, church, other groups outside of school. They don’t know any different and they appreciate what’s going on.”

When the Clinton Middle School opens in December, almost every student will maintain some of their teachers. They will also have new ones from the other campus. The class makeup will mix North and South students at an even rate.

“This has forced a collaboration among teachers that is unprecedented,” Brown said. Boyd said this will give students the chance to maintain continuity with old teachers and classmates and bring freshness to the school year with new teachers and classmates. With a building leadership team that has spent years focusing on this smooth transition, he believes the district is ready for what’s next.

“We’re giving them comfort and the orientation of branching out and meeting other kids,” Boyd said.

With every passing day, excitement over the grand opening of CMS mounts. Brown said the students are ready; Olson and Boyd both said staff is eager to get into the district’s shiny new facility.

Of all the things that appeared to be going right about the next chapter of Clinton schools, the district

could not avoid its greatest setback — the weather. It started with a wetter-than-normal April 2013 — the month Estes and Company broke ground. It continued through a record cold winter that made safe constructive renovation impossible.

The middle school was originally scheduled to open in time for the 2014-2015 school year when classes resumed in August. It's now scheduled to be complete in October. Students are scheduled to begin classes there Dec. 1 following an extended Thanksgiving break.

This was a blow to Estes project manager Eric White, who said he prides himself on sound school-making. Nonetheless, these setbacks were completely unavoidable, he said.

"It's very frustrating, especially when you know the importance of this project on the Clinton community," White said. "We work through winters and springs all the time and can push construction through. For some reason, this year hasn't been favorable."

But the benefit that still remains: "You're going to get a great school," White said.

In light of all this — with the visions that started nearly 20 years ago, with all of the retooling that CCSD has undergone since they identified those district needs, and with district administration's view that Clinton Middle School will propel educational needs — Brown can't help but feel the district is on the verge of something special.

"I look at the school as being bigger than the building itself," he said.

As for Boyd, he described the feeling as a "fresh start." The district is even hosting a second back to school night.

"It's like you're ending a school year and starting a school year all over again," Boyd said. "Opportunities are being created because of the new middle school. It has invoked a lot of positive conversations.

"It's a big step. We're going to support our students going through that."