

BHS Needs an Infusion of “Old School Pride”

My first visit to BHS as the interim superintendent of schools in 2014 turned out to be a study in contrasts. I expected to see a facility that reflected the high value that members of this vibrant college town place on education. Yet, while the building was clean and generally well maintained, it came across as dated and tired. In an era where building security is a critical concern, the maze-like complex with its many access points was a safety nightmare. In a green state like Vermont, where clean energy and energy efficiency are priorities, you could feel the drafts through the windows and the uneven effects of outdated heating controls. At a time when we expect seamless integration of technology in our daily work and personal lives, students and teachers struggled to compensate for an inadequate technology infrastructure. Teacher efforts to employ the latest instructional techniques had to overcome the restrictions of classrooms designed for the old “stand and deliver” approach. Although accessibility standards and regulations governing accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges have been in place for decades, the building was still not in full compliance.

In asking myself why the community accepted these conditions, I found myself reflecting on my experience while serving as superintendent in another school district where we took on a high school upgrade project of similar scope and expense. The high school had been built in the late 1950’s as a replacement for the “old high school,” which by default made it the “new high school.” Decades later, long time members of the community still maintained an image of it in their minds as the “new high school” and therefore could not understand why it would need a major upgrade. Many younger adults without children, or whose children had not yet entered high school had no direct experience with the facility, so the notions of its deficiencies were fairly abstract in their minds. Parents of school age children for whom the building conditions were a deal breaker either never moved into the community, moved out, or sent their children to a private school. As a result, the community simply lacked a critical mass of residents in recent years who perceived they had reason to be invested in an upgrade. I suspect similar dynamics may be at play in the case of the 1960’s era BHS facility as well.

Ten years after the completion of the high school project I was involved with, the actual benefits have equaled and in some cases exceeded our expectations. The many deficiencies of the old facility, which were very comparable to those associated with the current BHS facility, have indeed been corrected in ways that have had a direct positive impact on students, staff, and the community. But at the risk of sounding “old school,” I would say that perhaps the most surprising and powerful outcome has been a dramatically increased sense of school pride that has had numerous positive spillover effects. Bolstered by a feeling that they are entering a first class high school facility every morning, student attitudes and associated behaviors are more positive. Teachers are excited to show off what they have been able to accomplish with the aid of modern spaces designed to support best practices. Parents feel proud to be able to send their children to a state of the art school. The school building is now seen as an asset in attracting families with children to move into the community, as opposed to a liability that real estate agents had to gloss over. The community in general is proud that they stepped up and made all of this possible (and relieved that the tax impact has been significantly offset by a corresponding decline in deferred maintenance costs).

At a time when many folks are wondering if voting in an election really makes a difference, I can tell you from experience that voting to upgrade a high school building does!
Howard Smith, Interim Superintendent, 2014-15