

The WHS project: a principal's perspective

By Andrew Keough/guest columnist

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People often ask me, "What will you be looking for in the high school project?" As a relative newcomer to the community, I try to avoid weighing in directly on which building option (new or renovation/addition) I would prefer that the people of this town select. However, as a 20-year veteran of public education and a witness to some significant building projects (Hopkinton High School, new construction, completed fall 2001; and Medfield High School, renovation/addition, completed fall 2004), I can comment on what I think the key considerations are in the planning of a high-quality, high-performing high school facility. In this article, I would like to highlight these factors, from a building administrator's standpoint, in the hopes of assisting those of you still forming an opinion.

When building or renovating a high school, it is wise to remember that one is attempting to create an environment that will serve not only as an educational institution, but as a home away from home for teenage children. This *cannot* be understated. High school students spend roughly seven hours a day in school. When involved in athletics or performing arts, that number can jump to 10 hours a day. How a building looks and feels to the individuals who report there each and every day is equally as important as a building's functionality. With this in mind, I would like to list what I would consider to be the traits of high quality/high performing high school buildings.

High Quality/High Performing High School Buildings:

Are comfortable, safe and conducive to learning. They fully support all facets of the program by providing appropriate classroom, office and meeting space. The classroom spaces are designed to comfortably accommodate a wide variety of teaching and learning styles.

Include flexible and adaptive spaces for a growing enrollment of students with disabilities.

Support the increasing student interest and participation in co-curricular activities such as athletics, the fine and performing arts, with appropriately sized and equipped facilities.

Are built with the student in mind. They facilitate student flow, providing a simple and logical way for students to travel from class to class and to access faculty, administrators and other services throughout the day.

Are pleasing to the eye and are bright and airy. They support environments that are uplifting and include "student spaces," which young people can claim as their own. They are open and welcoming, and serve as a source of pride to students and faculty alike.

Serve as the heart of a community. They provide not only for the needs of students, but for the general population as well. When equipped with attractive public spaces, such as an auditorium, library, cafeteria, gymnasium, fitness center and thoughtfully designed athletic fields, people are drawn to the facility.

Are equipped with sufficient work and storage spaces for teachers, and provide students, faculty and staff with convenient access to up to date technology and equipment.

Are designed logically to support a community feel. When entering these buildings individuals instantly feel centrally located and welcomed by attractive lighting, windows and artifacts honoring the communities' heritage. Student artwork and/or murals adorn the walls. Spaces are thoughtfully numbered and identified; people never feel "lost" in these buildings.

Are equipped with ample parking for staff, students and guests, yet encourage alternate means of transportation by providing bike racks, walking paths and access to public transportation.

Are designed to make use of environmentally friendly technologies, which become woven into the curriculum of the school. Graduates leave with an understanding that their community valued responsible use and conservation of natural resources.

I am excited to be here at such an important time in Wellesley's history. The decisions to be made in the coming months will affect young people's lives for generations to come. The final planning process will require vision and determination. I am certain the taxpayers of Wellesley will choose wisely, for on a project of this magnitude, where the stakes are high and the window of opportunity open only briefly, there is little room for error.

Andrew Keough is Wellesley High School's principal.