

How the school crumbles – middle school faces familiar challenges

by Ron Georg
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As Grand County School District officials plan for the district's future, addressing the deficiencies outlined in the facilities assessment released earlier this year, it's clear they can't fix all the problems. Three schools are recommended for replacement, but the district can only bond for enough money to replace two—and the Grand County Middle School probably won't be one of those.

"I have to say I'm in agreement, even though I'd like to see the middle school first," Grand County Middle School principal Melinda Snow said. "The realities are that the conditions of those elementary schools are really dangerous. The kids who can fend for themselves the least, they need to be protected first. We go through emergency drills and things with the kids, and one time I was interviewing the kids during a mock drill, and I asked one of the kids, 'do you feel safe here?' and one of the kids said, 'yeah, but I'm glad my little brother wasn't here, he'd be so scared.' It really brought perspective back to me, about how those little ones need a safe environment."

While the older kids at the middle school may be better prepared to deal with the challenges of an old school, Snow emphasized that her school received the same recommendation from the architects and engineers who condemned the other two. "They looked around the cafeteria, and they said, well, this building is okay," Snow said, referring to a meeting with the architects held in the middle school's cafeteria, a stand-alone building constructed decades after the middle school was built in 1962. "It could use a little renovation, but the rest, knock it down and start over."

Of course, even the cafeteria is problematic. It doesn't have its own kitchen; food is brought from the high school on golf carts. It has no cooling, and huge expanses of glass allow the building to heat up uncomfortably during many months. It may be solid – one of the few district structures which could hold up in an earthquake, unlike the rest of the middle school – but the cafeteria presents a security risk instead of a safety hazard.

"The cafeteria was not built originally as a part of the school. It's a stand-alone building; it has no intercom. It's a safety concern for me," Snow said.

Security issues also come up on a regu-

lar basis because of the school's location, adjacent to the high school and the Mill Creek Parkway. High school students heading for the district's Vocational Center often disrupt classes, banging on windows and looking into classrooms. Anyone walking along the parkway can access school grounds.

"We have people walk up, look around, check out the dumpster – it's kind of strange for the kids," Snow said.

Inside the building, the middle school staff works hard to keep a happy face on the old building. "That's why we started doing the murals," Snow said. "You walk in and say, 'wow this is a cool place, this is a good place, it's happy, it's inviting.' But it's lots of band-aids. If that's what we can afford to do, then that's what we'll keep doing. We need somebody to look at the realities of it and say, 'our kids deserve better.' This isn't about the adults whining and complaining about the cracks in the walls. This is about the kids' safety and their perspective of the place that they're educated in."

The middle school was originally built as a high school, which explains the shower facility in the boys' locker room. While that may seem like a bonus in a middle school, the reality is the extra tile and plumbing leads to extra mold and maintenance – so the showers are mostly unused.

On the other hand, despite the school's history, it has no facilities for traditional home economics studies, which now fall under the heading "TLC," for Technology, Life and Career. "It's supposed to be an exploratory, a hands-on experience," TLC teacher Helen Benson said. "I taught this before we moved into this school, and the kids loved it. We rotated from kitchen to kitchen, with each doing something different. In one they're making something in a microwave, in another they're using a blender. It took about five or six days to go through all that. Here kids can't do it, because they've got to be able to wash their hands or they can't do a thing. The kids get zero hands-on experience, it's not conducive to good curriculum."

The inadequacies of the TLC room exemplify how the changing needs of education can't be met with aging infrastructure. "There are several areas in this school where there are so many plugs into the outlets. The wiring continues to be an issue," Snow said. "This school was not built for modern technology,

and we have a lot. We are functioning very well in the world of technology as far as what we offer, but the safety – here's a great example. In the ladies' room, there's a vent, a light, a heater, and something else. If you turn any three of those on, you blow out the microwave in the staff room down the hallway. You can always tell when someone is in the ladies' room on a cold day."

Most of the problems cited in the facilities report – wiring issues, plumbing problems, roofing deficiencies – are categories, not individual issues. Even problems which have been addressed keep coming up. While the roof has been repaired to the extent that tiles are no longer falling throughout the building, water now pools up over the gym, leaking into that space. "That's a safety issue. We have kids playing sports from the time the building opens until ten o'clock at night. We've inviting people from other districts to play. Basketball, volleyball, we have lots of people in that gym," Snow said.

Outside the gym, Snow pauses beside a brick wall at an entrance to the building permanently closed for security reasons. She grins as she puts a hand to the wall and shares a bit of middle school lore. "They say if enough people push on it, this wall moves," she said. "I haven't tried; I almost don't want to know. Can you imagine if that came down?"

Like the two schools which are tentatively slated for replacement, the middle school is too small. Library and office spaces are cramped to the point of inescapable clutter. Time which could be spent with students is spent organizing materials and shuttling supplies from storage to classroom.

The staff at the middle school can handle all this—they have no choice. However, Snow hopes that someday they can be freed from the challenges presented by the building to face the challenges presented by students. "These kids already need more than we can give," Snow said. "These kids need to feel enlightenment, they need to feel like, 'wow, I'm glad to be here'. A new school, that would do that for these kids. At one time in their educational career, I hope they're in a new building. By the time they get to the high school, it's not new either."