II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The District

Highland / Weld RE9 School District is located in north central Colorado, east of I-25 and borders Wyoming. The district serves approximately 950 students from kindergarten to 12th Grade who reside in the communities of Ault, Pierce, Nunn and Carr. With its small-town spirit and dedication to student and educational opportunity, is a sought-after school district not only within Weld County but also the state of Colorado. With its proximity to the larger cities of Fort Collins and Greeley and large swaths of undeveloped land, continued growth is a natural progression for the school district both in the near and far term. Planning for this growth is a necessary and critical step for future success ensuring that decisions are intentional, inclusive and cohesive.

The district currently has three schools: one elementary, one middle and one high school. Highland Elementary School is located just west of U.S. 85 in Pierce Colorado. The middle and high school share the same campus in five distinct and adjacent educational buildings in Ault Colorado. The average age of the educational facilities is 55 years. A summary of the existing academic facilities is as follows:

Highland Middle School – 6-8 grade, 21,505 s.f. built in 1921
  East Gymnasium Building (used for middle school PE), 19,014 s.f. built in 1952
  Learning Center (shared middle & high school library & special education), 6,600 s.f. built in 1990
  Home Economics (used for high school credit recovery), 1,975 s.f. built in 1946
Highland High School – 9-12 grade, 87,640 s.f. built in 1975 with additions in 1984 and 2016

District map
The Process
Weld RE-9 school district has undertaken this master planning process to study the demographics of the district, document the condition of the existing school facilities and evaluate educational programming - both from the perspective of where we are today as well as where we need to be in the future. This ensures the plan for action - the master plan - builds on the district’s strengths, addresses challenges, and provides a flexible yet core value driven framework for decision making to guide future improvements.

It was through this process that the recommendations noted in section XVI – Strategic Plan for Implementation were made, aligning with core district statements:

*We build excellence. Our strategic planning is focused on student achievement, specifically, creating students who think independently, creatively and critically. (We are) creating an atmosphere where students are engaged in rigorous and relevant learning.*

The master planning process involved the work of many groups within the Highland / Weld RE9 community, including the District, the School Board, school administrators, staff, students, and community members.

The primary teams were:
- The Executive Team: primary decision-making group comprised of the District Superintendent, Business Manager, Director of Facilities and School Board President who made the final recommendations to the Board.
- The Visioning Team: the group setting the framework for the master plan strategy; comprised of members of the Executive Team, staff and community members.
- Educational Programming Team: key educators at every school provided input on their educational goals and how their existing facilities supported or hindered those goals.
- Community feedback: Parents and community members were given the opportunity to provide confidential feedback to the 2 preferred master planning options. That feedback can be found in the appendix.

Visioning Team Core Values
Assessment Findings & Facility Conditions

The Highland schools were reviewed by the Master Planning Consultant Team as part of the facility assessment exercise. This exercise serves as a complement and checkpoint against the assessments performed by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) in 2020.

While the facilities are clean and have been well maintained, the facilities average 55 years old and have multiple deficiencies that need to be addressed. The assessments used the following criteria to produce the list of deficiencies. These criteria relate solely to the physical aspects of the facility; educational programming suitability was reviewed separately:

- Code violations
- Safety and security conditions
- Building maintenance

The identified deficiencies can be summarized as follows:

- Aging and inflexible infrastructure and systems
- Safety and security concerns
- Accessibility updates needed throughout
- Limited to no expansion opportunities in current locations
- Energy inefficiency and building envelope deficiencies
- Fire alarm and fire protection concerns.
- Electrical and lighting upgrades needed
- Mechanical upgrades needed including adequate ventilation, heating and cooling are significant issues in the elementary and middle schools.

Programming & Adequacy

Alongside the physical repair/replacement/improvement needs of the campus, the complementary initiative for completing a comprehensive master plan was the Highland / Weld RE9 School District’s desire to ensure that their students have access to safe, accessible, modern teaching and learning environments. The students of today must be proficient problem solvers that can work in varied environments with a full understanding of the value of collaborative processes and outcomes. With a school facility that average 55 years old, the teachers are forced to rise to this challenge within an environment built for traditional one-directional teaching. Students, tasked with being technologically proficient as well as collaborative to compete in today’s job market, are impeded with lack of infrastructure and varied spaces for different types of learning. Providing a safe environment that supports these pursuits of excellence is a direct reflection of the core values established by the Executive Team and a driving factor for initiating a master planning process.

The Master Planning Consultant Team led a series of school tours for the Visioning Team so that the group could become familiar with what other school districts are doing in Colorado. Lastly, a series of educational adequacy surveys were conducted with key educators at each school. Chapter VIII outlines the current and needed programs in detail, but the following represents a summary of the needed educational environment improvements:
Highland Elementary School
- Lack of collaborative spaces to support project-based learning throughout.
- No science lab type area to support experiments.
- Technology space is inflexible and not set up to support collaborative areas.
- There is no available or adequate space for students to have recess in inclement weather or to support popular club activities.
- Undersized cafeteria.
- No performance space.
- Lack of electrical and technology infrastructure.
- K-2 playground is undersized and lacks appropriate equipment; field area cannot accommodate a full grade together.

Highland Middle School
- Space limitations means using rooms for functions they are not intended for (e.g. core classes in the band room).
- Some classrooms so small that class size must be limited.
- Finite footprint of building means no good opportunity for expanding.
- Age of facility means inadequate electrical and technology infrastructure.
- Would benefit from a dedicated STEM and/or VoAg lab.

Highland High School
- Additional classroom space needed for growing student population.
- Would like to increase ability to offer STEM courses; digital-type programming (coding, CAD, Photoshop) as well as engineering or physics.

Strategic Plan Implementation

Extensive evaluation of the existing facilities alongside projected growth in our elementary school population has indicated the need to plan for both a new elementary and middle school. The age of the buildings and their inherent limitations, continued population growth and the district’s commitment to student success means planning improvements for these age groups is a top priority.

Option A - The most cost-effective option is to build a single K-8 school on school district property already owned by the district adjacent to their current middle and high school campus in Ault Colorado. The total project cost for this new facility and demolition and reclamation of the existing Highland Elementary School site is estimated to be between $84 and $90 million dollars depending on when the project was funded to start and associated escalation implications. (Either starting in late 2023 to open in 2026 or starting in late 2024 to open in 2027.

Option B – This option would ultimately keep a K-5 elementary school in Pierce and provide a new K-8 school in Ault. The sequence would require the new K-8 be constructed on the property the district already owns in Ault. When completed, the existing Highland Elementary School students would relocate to that new school to allow for the existing K-5 in Piece to be demolished and then rebuilt in place. Ultimately, the district would have 2 smaller elementary schools (one K-5 in Pierce and one K-8 Ault). The inefficiencies of 2 schools and extended sequencing increase the total project estimate over Option A to be between $92 and $98 million dollars. Like Option A, the cost variation is due to escalation depending on when a bond could be passed for funding.
Initial Community Feedback

The school district sent out an anonymous district wide survey outlining the master plan process, initial conclusions, and recommendations. In addition to outlining Options A and B, the community was surveyed on their perceptions on important issues. Feedback on two key questions include:

69% of the initial respondents agree or very much agree that “the existing elementary school in Pierce is outdated and needs to be replaced.”

72% of these same respondents agree or very much agree “I would support a bond issue to fund a new school within the Weld Re-9 District.”

(Refer to Appendix E for the specific community flyer, survey, and survey results through 11/6/22.)

Conclusion

The district needs new elementary and middle school facilities to address aging facilities, demographics, educational needs, safety, and security. To fund these projects, the district should consider a BEST Grant application in early 2023 and potentially again in 2024, and/or the need for a successful bond campaign and election in the fall of 2023 and/or 2024.