

A Letter from Dr. Thomas H. Debolt

Virginia Educational Facility Planners' 2009 Planner of the Year



When most people think of northern Virginia, they think of affluence. But Manassas Park was founded in 1955 to provide affordable housing for World War II and Korean War veterans. Back then it was a rural community of 3,000 small cracker boxes but as Washington, D.C., grew westward, it became a suburb. It now it has just over 11,000 homes in 2.5 square miles. For about 20 years, things went pretty well. But people in Manassas Park felt looked down on, and in 1975 a small group voted to secede from Prince William County by becoming a city. The county responded by levying a large school tax, and the leaders of Manassas Park started their own school district almost overnight, purchasing one over-priced school and some trailers. It was a struggle, because the community had no tax base. There was huge teacher turnover, 75 percent one year. Superintendents and principals didn't stay long either. Test scores were nowhere near the state average, and we had the second-worse facilities in the state. But there are good people in the community, and good leadership. They realized we couldn't get anywhere unless the schools improved.

People knew there were serious problems with the school facilities, but thought they couldn't do much about it. People in the community felt locked into poverty, used to being looked down on by neighboring areas. The high school students were so ashamed they didn't want to play home games.

We had to work hard to get the fourth council vote we needed to get an appropriation for a new high school. We knew this high school had to be on time, on budget and world-class. All our dreams were packaged with it. If we were successful, we could move on to the next school. Manassas Park High School was completed in 1999 at a cost of \$99/square foot, the best in Virginia. (Two years ago, Cougar Elementary was built for \$86/square foot. We've been able to get great school buildings and make effective use of our funds; but that takes a lot of time for the school district to manage.)

We wanted to move in as soon as the school was available. On a Friday morning, high school students and community volunteers moved into the new school, using school buses instead of U-Haul trucks or movers, to save money. Then we had a giant party. We had done the groundbreaking on July 4, complete with high school band—but people didn't believe it would get built. It wasn't until dedication night that they believed they had a new high school. Then the city council met there for a unanimous vote to do the next project. The first project had been a 600-student high school, because the councilors wouldn't give us enough money for the

850-student school we needed. This time they accepted our recommendation for a 1,200-student primary school (K-3).

Cornerstones of Our Success

When the state first implemented new Standards of Learning (SOLs) tied to funding, people in Manassas Park thought they'd better un-secede because there was no way they could meet them (not that Prince William County would have let us back in). But now the district's test scores are something to brag about, and 83 percent of our graduates go on to higher education. Our success rests on several cornerstones.

- Outstanding support and leadership from the school board
- A significant increase in both political and economic support from the City
- Involving the community to promote ownership
- Selecting the finest educational professionals and support staff members (made possible with better facilities and competitive pay)
- Continuing to significantly improve salaries, benefits and staff development
- Restructuring and reorganizing the way we use time
- Strengthening the K-12 reading program
- Designing and implementing curriculum based on the SOLs
- Supporting the educational program with large infusions of instructional materials and technology
- Expanding and strengthening the K-12 fine arts and student activities programs
- Significantly improving our school facilities

Manassas Park High School

The school has three stories, because of the lack of land. All academic spaces are on the second and third floors, above the surrounding industrial site and away from the public areas of the school. The first floor houses an auditorium, cafeteria, theater, library and a large multipurpose space that is used for many public and private events (including weddings). The plan is to build it out over 20 years; we have just finished an addition that brings its capacity to 800 students (142,000 square feet).

We thought the new high school must be in the center of the town and follow the education program, so the building would make change permanent. The National Association of Secondary School Principals' "Breaking Ranks" influenced our thinking: making high school smaller, student-centered, personalized and rigorous. Highlights of the educational program:

- Facilitates varying teaching and learning strategies in all learning places (including access to technology)
- Highly organized and aligned with the curriculum

- Supports interdisciplinary planning, teaching and learning (interdisciplinary office spaces for faculty and interdisciplinary classroom pods)
- Strong emphasis on personalizing each student's educational experience
- Using corridors, stairs and commons areas as learning spaces by providing carpet and electrical outlets, for individual students and small groups with a teacher.
- These are places students want, where they behave well. Students don't want to sit at desks all day. We wanted to provide comfortable, observable places for students. When you see kids out in the world, in the mall say, you hardly ever see them sitting in rows of 30. We wanted kids to claim parts of the school as their own spaces.
- Learning spaces that feature auditory privacy and visual openness (encourages responsible student behavior by visual openness and the location of professional offices)
- A unique student commons that ties the facility together (adjacent to electives and student services).
- Student health and fitness as well as sports programs.

Time and space are the same thing, and we knew we must use them in different ways in the new high school. We spent a lot of time thinking through programming and space needs with educators, who can talk more easily about time; and then designed the facility around that. We brought in a scheduling expert for a discussion about the ideal day for teachers and for students, which became the primary guiding factor in the design process.

We used high-quality and visually pleasing materials. We had some concerns about vandalism, but the result was a good story about human nature: if it looks good, people will take care of it. We have had zero vandalism. We took students to the construction site, and we challenged them there and again at the opening ceremony to take care of their new school. It started a tradition that continues today: the students clean their own building on the last day of school, and they monitor each other.

We put mirrors in the hallways, because students dress better if they see themselves; but we didn't put mirrors in the bathrooms, because it causes students to congregate there. Another tip: staff-room dishwashers significantly reduce teacher absenteeism.

Cougar Elementary

Cougar Elementary is also three stories. It has a parallel block schedule; students go up and down the stairs, moving between teachers. Follow-up studies have identified several benefits. The kids like the stairs, and they like being in different places with different teachers during the day. We found it doesn't cost instructional time, that moving between rooms is more efficient than activity transitions within classrooms. Children don't like to sit all day, and the active element of moving between spaces and up and down the stairs helped.

Homeroom teachers work with 10-12 students; most teach only language arts and math. Other teachers teach science and social studies in labs. The labs are larger, the math and language arts classrooms smaller—so it averages out at the same cost. All teachers have offices.

Each house has grades K-3, like the school itself. Some have looping assignments so students stay with the same teacher for three years. The teachers really love it: why ask them to teach six subjects? We had to transition the original staff into this; but now teachers are moving into the district to teach at Cougar. It's a way to get class size down, especially for reading and math.

Conclusion

Every school has to find its own way. Our high school opens with an assembly on learning, rather than a pep rally. We give academic letters to 150 students and recognize National Honor Society and Beta Club students, as well as students who pass all their SOLs. The grand finale is naming the Most Valuable Cougar: a student who tries hard and helps the school. Manassas Park High School is about participation and excellence.

Now that we have a new high school, a new elementary school, and a new middle school, we're working on a new upper elementary school. The new facilities have transformed the school system, and that has impacted the community. The city has recently built a new firehouse and a new police station; people are restoring historical buildings; and a new town center is being built. This is a case where the school system changed and brought the community along with it.

Tom DeBolt is Superintendent of Manassas Park City Schools in Manassas Park, Virginia. The annual Planner of the Year Award is the highest and most distinguished honor conferred by the Virginia Educational Facility Planners.

