

SHERIDAN SCHOOL DISTRICT
*A Case Study in Designing for
Under-Resourced Communities*





Appropriate *learning environments* can do wonders for a student's ability to *engage with their education* and *find success*.

Every student deserves the opportunity to learn in an innovative environment designed with their needs in mind. That being said, some districts have a difficult time attempting to provide these facilities while managing tight budgets and infrastructure challenges. In 2008, Sheridan School District faced economic constraints and a lack of reliable infrastructure across the district learning spaces. Additionally, the schools struggled to perform academically, adding another challenge to improving education in Sheridan.

Leaders in the district knew the community needed not only a substantive change, but a change agent partner to help steer the process toward success.



Introduction . . . *Issues and Challenges* . . . *Solutions* . . . *Outcomes* . . . *Conclusion*



ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Sheridan's major challenges came from every level. The school facilities needed significant upgrades to ensure safety, security and an effective, positive learning environment for all students. A bond election passed in 2006 was envisioned as the solution, but poor management and other missteps derailed the project. When Michael Clough came on as Superintendent in July 2008, he immediately saw the risks of the project and pulled the plug on all plans. After hiring Jim West with Vanir as a new owner's representative, Clough began to assess each "system" within the district to prioritize the new project plan. Systems ranged from facilities to the teaching and learning departments.

The only system without a major issue was financial services. With this knowledge gathered, Clough and West presented the breadth of facility issues to the School Board to illustrate the gravity of the challenges facing the district.

Breakout Section 2

SOLUTIONS



Not every facilities issue has to have a huge price tag. By assessing each system and prioritizing the needed changes, Clough, West and others in the district began to identify low-cost solutions which could make significant improvements. Some systems needed new management, restructuring or other personnel changes while other systems could improve with a coat of fresh paint, new flooring and brightening the learning environments.

To implement the needed changes and help guide the redesign process, Sheridan brought in Wold Architects and Engineers. Job Gutierrez, a partner with Wold and the principal-in-charge for the Sheridan project, became an essential force in navigating the changes within the district. Sheridan needed a firm that understood the district's mission and how to deal with facility needs in one of the most under-resourced district in Colorado. **Wold took on the facility master planning process and began to forge a relationship with the community.**

Michael Clough says the firm made more than a physical or aesthetic impact on the district.

“Wold pushed us to dream about what could be and didn't let us settle for less.”

The first facility project served as a test run for the team of Sheridan, Vanir and Wold to determine what was possible and how to configure a collaborative team for future projects. The project consisted of improving the high school gymnasium and lobby through low-cost efforts such as new flooring, improved lighting, new paint and updated fixtures. With a test project complete, the team moved on to a bigger challenge.

Multiple facilities needed safety upgrades to prioritize security throughout the district. Colorado's BEST Grant program allots funds to districts in need each year. The first of Sheridan's BEST Grants addressed security concerns by investing in card readers, secure vestibules and other safety mechanisms in multiple schools in the district.



Wold's experience with the BEST Grant program helped Sheridan receive those funds. Sheridan had an existing relationship with another firm prior to meeting Gutierrez and others from Wold. After seeing the level of attention and outcomes from Wold, Sheridan terminated that prior long-term relationship in favor of a stronger partnership with Wold.

Cyndi Wright, Director of Facilities and Transportation for Sheridan School District, says she knew Wold was the right partner from the first meeting with members of the firm.

“ From day one, Wold was transparent about the process of working together. Their word was their bond and that's the way I operate. The first facilities projects helped to build a level of trust and a strong working relationship prior to taking on the biggest project yet, Fort Logan Northgate. ”

“When we hired Wold for Fort Logan Northgate, the relationships were already comfortable,” Wright says. “The payoff for Sheridan through this project was exponential. The trust we have for Wold is deep and strong.

They made the right decisions and I'm so glad we had a trusting, solid working relationship. We're still friends and still have a strong connection even beyond the work. Wold brought experience from other schools and projects, but they always brought it back to our driving force - **our 'Why' - which made the experience positive for all. ”**



Breakout Section 3

OUTCOMES

Since Wold proved more than capable to take on the challenges in Sheridan, the district looked to bigger obstacles. The district needed to present another bond election to the community to fund a new school. The theme of this campaign revolved around the fact that students in Sheridan deserved better, safer, innovative learning environments.

“The mantra of the project became:
Your children deserve this. They can and should have facilities as nice as other districts, particularly wealthier districts, ”

Clough says. The under-resourced nature of the community does not have to reflect on the physical spaces provided to them.

An essential question remained: Why should the community vote to improve the facilities if the academic performance is in dire shape? This challenge resulted in the district releasing teachers and making other tough changes to build up operations and gain support.

Leaders in Sheridan had to show they were willing to make the necessary changes and prioritize academic improvements alongside facility improvements. As a result, Sheridan went from a turnaround district to improvement (a two level improvement) after the new school opened. Test scores and attendance rates improved across the district, showing the renewed commitment to education from students and families to administrators.

In addition to quantitative results, Sheridan’s renaissance impacted the community on a deeper level. They took ownership of the project and had great pride in what they built. At the grand opening, parents and others in the community repeatedly conveyed the same message: **“We can’t believe this is ours.”** The entire community had accomplished this goal, not just the board members and designers. More than 900 people came to the ribbon-cutting because this marked a resounding success for the entirety of Sheridan. Sheridan School Board President Bernadette Saleh says, “Fort Logan Northgate is now the ‘gem of the district.’ The building is so beautiful and striking. What Wold was able to do with this building uplifted the entire district. The improved environment makes a major impact on students, teachers, parents and anyone who comes through the building.”









CONCLUSION

Takeaways from the work in Sheridan are both tangible and intangible. Students, parents, staff and administrators continue to take pride and ownership in their schools while working to better the learning Experience for every person. The efforts didn't come from only one source, but the combined efforts of the most skillful, knowledgeable people for the job. As Clough puts it, "In so many of Sheridan's shining moments, Wold is there."

The Wold team took on a challenging project in an under-resourced district and helped work to make it a prime example of K-12 education in Colorado. With the wealth of challenges facing the team, the district, community and firm not only overcame, but revitalized Sheridan along the way.

Today, Sheridan School District features not only the "gem of the district" in Fort Logan Northgate, but also improved school facilities and a reenergized community. The renaissance in Sheridan was multifaceted, including improvements in the schools, a transformational Habitat for Humanity housing project, a new public library, municipal improvements to sidewalks and water quality and much more. Looking back on the 2008 version of Sheridan, citizens see a pathway of investment in their community on every level. Not just a financial investment, but one of time, effort and pride in their home.

The district is still changing, as Wright says. "Some aspects are more challenging but others are super easy with the foundation we've built. The fact remains that Fort Logan Northgate is still the pinnacle of all of our buildings and families look forward to their kids going there and being part of that school. It's really a driving factor in the community.

And now the board is asking, 'When are we building a new high school?' and it's just about figuring out how to do more projects like that.

To this day Wold is still the first firm we reach out to. They're great about building relationships. It's not just one person, it's every single person that we've worked with."

Wold focuses on collaboration and incorporating input from all stakeholders to create and implement the best plan for each community. How can our skill set translate to your set of obstacles and achieve a similarly effective outcome?

