

Westminster Public Schools Superintendent's State of the District Report Presented by: Dr. Pamela Swanson, Superintendent January 22, 2019

Good Evening President McCoy, Members of the Board, and the Westminster Public Schools community.

It is an honor to present my eighth State of the District report on the status of Westminster Public Schools. It is a good ... make that great story to share.

Think back to a year ago when I called upon all of us to be "Westy Strong."

What if I had told you that in 2018 WPS would:

- Get off the state accountability clock
- Pass a mill levy override
- Host a remarkably successful summit celebrating a decade of Competency Based Education.
- Open a Westminster Boy & Girls Club
- Open John E. Flynn A Marzano Academy, and
- Celebrate our Board of Education's recognition as State Board of the Year

Many would have thought those are some great goals, but maybe a little too ambitious. I don't think I would have thought that, because I knew the character of the people in this district and community.

Our staff, students, parents, taxpayers and Board all proved that “We are Westy Strong.”

No doubt about it, 2018 was a heavy lift, and while it is tempting to look back and relive all those wonderful moments, we can’t afford to do that. We still have a lot of work to do and many things to accomplish.

I am pleased to tell you....that 2019 is already off to a good start

Graduation Rate

Last week the Colorado Department of Education released high school graduation rates and I am thrilled to tell you that WPS improved by an impressive 10% ... the biggest increase of any district in the metro area.

The four-year rate for 2018 Westminster High School graduates improved to 79.1 percent compared to 69.8 percent in 2017. Hidden Lake High School jumped an impressive 13 percent.

Our five-year graduation rate for the WHS class of 2018 is 82.3 percent.

That five-year rate is important because it speaks to the value of our Competency Based System which allows some students to graduate early while others take more time to fill in gaps in their learning or access post-high school coursework. Our focus on competency means that when a student receives a diploma, he or she is truly ready for “the day after graduation.”

Marzano Certification

Another recent celebration is the news that John E. Flynn A Marzano Academy has received certification as a Safe and Collaborative School. It’s a major first step to becoming recognized as an elite “Marzano -High Reliability School. No school in the country has mastered all five levels and our goal is to become the first in the nation.

Teacher Seth Abbott was also certified as a level two high reliability teacher and is on pace to become the first teacher in the country to achieve level three status. It’s important to remember that the success of John E. Flynn A Marzano Academy

is a success for the district as a whole, because it serves as a lab school sharing ideas and best practices with staff across the district.

Registration

Still another point of pride ... just last week, we rolled out a new and improved online registration system that makes it easier than ever to enroll in any of our schools. The rollout coincides with an “out of district” marketing effort encouraging families to take a closer look at what we have to offer.

In the state open enrollment, we are truly a district without borders.

Governor’s Award

You may have noticed the banners outside many of our schools touting their performance ratings. In addition, Colorado STEM Academy and Metz Elementary were honored with the Governor’s Distinguished Improvement award.

Yes of 4A

I want to spend some time tonight talking about the mill levy override that was passed in November, and share with you some of our long and short term plans to advance Westminster Public Schools. We are so grateful to the voters of this community who chose to invest in our future.

If you recall from our election campaign, voters approved a \$9.9 million annual override allowing us to fund important programming to attract and retain quality staff and make additional investments in construction and safety and security projects. We intend to keep those promises.

Next month we will finalize a contract for \$78 million in Certificates of Deposit (“COPs”) that will allow us to use a portion of our new tax revenues to fund major projects that can be funded over 30 years... similar to a mortgage on a home. We are moving quickly on this plan while interest rates are low so we can get the best bang for our buck. As you know, other districts across the metro area are also investing in capital construction projects and there is an overall building boom. So, we have crafted a plan that allows for flexibility, allowing us to negotiate the best available price with contractors and construction companies. We are also restructuring our fiscal and facility oversight committees so we will have feedback from the community.

There are also some big projects I would like to highlight and can share with you tonight.

I'm excited to tell you that we will be building a new school on the existing site of Skyline Vista Elementary. Our analysis has determined that it makes no financial sense to spend millions of dollars for repairs and upgrades on a building that has outlived its usefulness. We anticipate an opening date in the fall of 2021. Students will continue at the existing school, while the new building is constructed and once work is finished and students are in the new building, we will scrape the old building. This is exciting news for the District as a whole and certainly the neighbors in the Skyline Vista community.

Another longer-term project is the continued expansion of our Career Technical Education ("CTE") program. One possible scenario is to move some of the programming to the another campus and have our high school students access both sites. Our CTE program is quickly expanding to fill the needs of a changing economy and the creation of an innovative hands on campus has enormous potential. This is also in-line with what our community has repeatedly told us they value.

We also promised our community that we would develop and implement a K-8 creative arts pipeline. While students at all schools will continue to receive access to the arts, Metz Elementary will be the site of our new Arts Magnet School. We are phasing in the school and many details remain a work in progress, so students who are currently at Metz will have the opportunity to continue at that school. Metz has already placed a strong emphasis on the arts so this move makes perfect sense. Construction will begin this summer and I will keep the community posted.

This summer, we will also begin long overdue landscaping and renovation work at Scott Carpenter Middle School that will be followed by mechanical upgrades, including air conditioning, new flooring and lighting, technology infrastructure and office upgrades. In conjunction with this work, the Board of Education is looking at the best way to address the education needs in the southeast portion of WPS. That region has significant development going on inside and outside the

district and will become more competitive in the area of student enrollment over time.

One last word about security. This is always our highest priority and the passage of our mill levy override is allowing us to create a standalone Safety Department that can integrate all our district needs. This coincides with our ongoing efforts to upgrade security entrances to schools that need it. The renovation work at Harris Park is a great example of the direction we are moving.

Round one of our plan to focus on secured entries and vestibules, as well as office remodels; will target Westminster Academy for International Studies, Fairview Elementary and Mesa Elementary. Round two will bring improvements to Sherrelwood, Sunset Ridge, Shaw Heights, F.M. Day and STEM Middle School.

We will also be making improvements to the Early Childhood Center and are looking for ways to expand our Early Learning Center. We already have a waiting list of families eager to enroll their children in our program.

The other key component of our mill levy override is our commitment to attract and retain high quality staff. As you know, there is a teacher shortage and many teachers across the country feel they are underpaid and undervalued. This is hitting close to home. Today Los Angeles Public Schools resolved their strike today and Denver Public Schools is on the brink of that decision right now

Negotiations

Our negotiations with the Westminster Education Association begin very soon and I can tell everyone that we are committed to a fair, transparent bargaining process. It is important to remember that even during very lean budget times and after failed mill levy override elections, WPS stuck with its commitment to competitively reward teachers for their hard work. Our average starting pay for teachers remains among the highest in the metro area. I trust that every teacher in the district knows how much they are valued and appreciated. Teaching in a Competency Based System requires a special kind of teacher, but as we have seen, the rewards for students and teachers are great and paying great dividends.

Off the Clock

Our celebration in August when we announced we were off the accountability clock despite the deck stacked against us, was the proudest moment of my career.

AdvancED and ACYI

We were also recognized by AdvancED with their Excellence in Education Award and by the Adams County Youth Initiative with their “Catalyst for Change Award.”

Growing our Own

The other component of our strategy to attract and retain quality staff is our effort to “grow our own” teachers and administrators. Four of our principals, and their going to kill me for this) Shannon Willy, Claudette Trujillo, Amber Swieckowski and Lisa Cyr, grew up in the community and are proud graduates. They all provide a special insight and a sense of continuity to the district. In fact, Shannon’s daughter is now a teacher at Scott Carpenter.

Center for Urban Education

We continue to encourage our high school students to pursue careers in education and come back home to make a difference. Tomorrow, we have been invited to speak at a leadership conference for the Center for Urban Education at UNC which has a special emphasis on bringing a diverse workforce into the classroom. If we want a diverse workforce we need to grow a diverse workforce.

Employer of the Year

Last year the Westminster Chamber of Commerce named Westminster Public Schools the “Large Employer of the Year.” Still another reflection of how far we have come.

Vision 2020

If what I have talked about tonight has a familiar ring to it, there is a reason for it. These accomplishments and plans align with our Vision 2020 Strategic Plan that laid out our pathway to the future. As I went back to read it in preparation for tonight’s remarks I was pleased to see how closely our outcomes aligned to our plan.

The 2020 plan had five specific components that we really wanted to focus on:

- Improving the district identity
- Becoming an educational leader
- Expanding career exploration and development
- Providing functional and safe infrastructure and facilities.
- Becoming an employer of choice...I'd like to change that to REMAINING!

I think we have succeeded in all five areas, but that doesn't mean we can rest.

Not by any stretch.

Looking to the Future

As we evolve into the next version of the 2025 Plan that will take us into the second quarter of the 21st century, we have some challenges to recognize and conquer.

The first is shifting demographics. As we have noted many times, neighborhoods are changing. Rising property values are forcing many lower income families to move further out of the metro area. This has already affected our enrollment as some large families have moved out of district and been replaced by single homeowners or young couples who don't yet have school aged children. Our challenge is to not only manage the decline in short-term enrollment but to make sure these new families come to WPS schools. We are also working to convince families who attend school outside the district to give WPS a second look. We have so much to offer.

As I say to everyone"Everybody is a recruiter."

We must also remain vigilant of the Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado State Board of Education. Those institutions are interested in preserving the status quo in which quote "high achieving" schools and districts aren't

challenged to improve, while districts and schools with a higher number of underserved students are given demeaning labels.

One of our district's proudest achievements last year was to lead the effort to stop CDE from changing the formula used to determine the performance ratings of schools and districts, yet again.

We were the ones to identify the flaws in the plan and pulled together a coalition of statewide educators to successfully kill the proposal. It was an important win, but also a reminder of how important it is to be engaged in the debate about the education accountability system. We need different options.

Once again, we are also a forceful voice in the battle over the proposed overhaul of the state school finance act and the need to create a more equitable system.

All of us in this room have played a role in meeting the goals we set for this district and breathing life back into a district that, not that long ago, was in big trouble. As I wrap up tonight, I want to give a shout out to our longest serving board member, Dino Valente, who is entering his last year on the board. He is term limited and will not be up for election next November. Dino joined the board during a time of turmoil for this district and provided a badly needed sense of pride, stability, and tenacity, and I know everyone is profoundly grateful for his service.

So that is an overview of where we stand in this first month of the New Year. My expectation is that a year from now we will be talking about the successes of 2019, while already focusing on 2020 organizations are either growing or dying-never standing still.

As George Courous, an educator specializing in leadership, innovation and teaching says, "in a world that is constantly moving forward, if you are standing still, you are falling behind."

We won't let that happen in WPS. Tomorrow morning we will get up and get going because our children deserve it!

Thank you and that concludes my report.