THE WEAVER HIGH SCHOOL RENOVATION PROJECT

As featured in the March 2019 article “Nothing Short of Excellence”, Construction In Focus magazine
Connecticut’s capital city of Hartford is known for many things, including being the home of the Mark Twain house, museums, and other historic and cultural institutions. Along with its rich history, it also boasts a public school system with 46 schools, of which 20 are magnet schools – schools with specialized programs that draw in students from outside district boundaries. In fact, Hartford Public High School is the second oldest public high school in the U.S.

Written by Samita Sarkar

Since 2012, Hartford Public Schools (HPS) has been planning major renovations to Thomas Snell Weaver High School, commonly referred to as Weaver High School, which was established in 1922. Though it was originally built to educate 2,000 students, it now serves about half that number. HPS received a $100 million-dollar grant shortly after announcing its renovation plans, which would allow Weaver High to better serve its student body, and that budget has since been raised to over $130 million.

There is another element to the project that makes it even more exciting; the renovation will include the joining of Richard J. Kinsella Performing Arts High School (another magnet school) with the career-focused Thomas Snell Weaver High under one building. As the Weaver2019.com website informs us, legislation granting 95 percent reimbursement for the multimillion-dollar project required an existing magnet school to be incorporated. Kinsella Performing Arts, a magnet school that enrolls both suburban and urban students under the Sheff v. O’Neill desegregation pact, was selected in 2016.

Hartford School District is a majority-minority district that has struggled with poverty despite being located near affluent, predominantly white suburbs, and HPS is working to address these inequities. The entire Weaver project is part of a much larger comprehensive, integrated plan to reconfigure the district. By 2022, HPS will have gone from 48 to 41 schools, from 43 to 31 facilities, and will release the operation of 12 facilities. This is all part of a strategic operating plan to provide nothing but the best of opportunities to all HPS students under the District Model for Excellence.

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Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, Superintendent of Schools and a graduate of Hartford Schools, says that the joining of Weaver and Kinsella was a great opportunity. “However, that opportunity fits within the larger construct around our restructuring of our district. We conducted extensive community engagement to redesign and re-imagine our district. It’s what we call our District Model for Excellence. The Weaver High School project is mostly about safe and equitable access to great schools and pathways, which was a priority that emerged from our engagement with our community and stakeholders. The project allows us to do just that.

Weaver High School is going to be serving neighborhood students. This now allows many of our families in that community to have a clear pathway from pre-kindergarten, to middle school, to high school.”

Dr. Torres-Rodriguez was featured in Working Mother, discussing the struggles of growing up around the poverty and violence of urban Hartford, and how she’s working to turn it around for the next generation.

It is an issue that can be tackled from many different angles. The District Model for Excellence has four priorities, which were identified by the community: teaching and learning (quality instruction to ensure students are college-ready); family and community partnerships; school culture and climate (all students should feel safe and valued); and operational effectiveness (maximizing the use of resources, initiatives, etc. while minimizing redundancies).
There is both a social and a structural component to the project, which at times resulted in challenges (as with any major construction project of this size). At the moment, the construction team is scheduled to complete the academic portion of the newly renovated Weaver High School so it is open to students this Fall 2019. The gymnasium and athletic component will be completed during 2020.

Weaver’s Doc Hurley Field House, which holds the school gymnasium, is currently undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation. This process involved communication between the community, engineers, and architects to reach an understanding, as originally some community members wanted some components in the athletic field house that architects did not have the square footage to accommodate.

“All of the feedback was taken into consideration during the design phase,” recalls Dr. Torres-Rodriguez. “When we processed the estimates, the cost it would take to create a full-competition indoor track just wasn’t feasible for us, short of taking the field house down and starting from scratch. Knowing that it was cost prohibitive, we engaged in cooperation with the State of Connecticut, City of Hartford, and the design team, and we incorporated requests and expectations into what is currently the model now.”

Another, albeit smaller, challenge was figuring out what material to use in the field: turf or grass. In the end, natural grass was considered, but synthetic turf was requested by the district for financial reasons and to make sure that it would be suitable for multi-sport competition at any time of year.

“Natural turf is more difficult to maintain in the context of state pesticide regulations for schools and will also require an irrigation system. The cost differential is approximately $350,000. With synthetic turf, students will be able to use the field year round. Multiple sports such as football, soccer, lacrosse and field hockey can be played without having to rest the field,” the school states on its website.

It can be challenging to keep a multi-year, multi-stakeholder, multimillion-dollar project running on schedule, as there can be a variety of factors that can impact timelines. The Weaver High School Construction timeline can be divided into five phases.

- Phase I, the abatement and demolition of the academic building and auditorium, ran from October 2015 to February 2017.
- Phase II was the construction of the renovated academic building and auditorium, from September 2017 to this August of 2019.
- Phase III, the abatement and demolition of the field house, started just a few months ago in September 2018, and will be finished this March of 2019.
- Phase IV, its construction, will be completed in January 2020.
- Phase V is to install furniture, fixtures and equipment (FF&E), and technology, which will happen this summer (June 2019–August 2019).

“The biggest challenge to keeping on schedule was actually the amount of rain we received last year. We held weekly meetings – and still do – between the project manager and the construction company. Information is brought to the Hartford School Choice & Facilities Committee, and continual dialog and adjustments are made to ensure that we remain on task and schedule,” says Dr. Torres-Rodriguez. “Other schools are closing, consolidating, or being restructured. We are being very mindful in making sure that we do anything and everything that we can to maintain the integrity of the timeline.”
The Weaver Steering Committee, instrumental in helping all stakeholders work through unforeseen challenges, was created to foster transparency and provide updates throughout the process for the community, and has informed the process of designing the high school. It is a large committee of city officials, parents, teachers, architects, community partners, and even former Weaver graduates.

Hartford Public Schools has also worked with many important stakeholders on the design team to make this project a reality, including: its representative, Arcadis/O&G Program Management; construction managers Newfield+Downes Joint Venture; architect of record and landscape architect The S/L/A/M Collaborative; associate architect Amenta Emma Architects PC; transportation engineers Milone and MacBroom; acoustical design Cavanaugh Tocci Associates; FF&E Mathieu Hopkins Associates; commissioning agent Colliers International; structural engineer Macchi Engineers, MEP engineer Consulting Engineering Services, fire protection engineering Aztech Engineers, civil and geotechnical engineer Freeman Companies; environmental engineer Eagle Environmental; communications, security and technology Guillen Technology Consultants, and government officials. These include the City of Hartford building inspector, fire marshal, and health department, and the Connecticut Department of Public Health.

As we reflect on the long but meaningful journey that Hartford Public Schools is embarking on with Weaver and Kinsella specifically, but also the District Model for Excellence as a whole, the project is in alignment with what the Hartford community was searching for:

- Clear, K–12 pathways that prepare students for college and career
- Improvement in the quality of educational facilities
- Greater access to resources, including thought-provoking programming and extracurriculars in what the community calls an “equity move”
- Opportunities for partnership between neighborhood schools and magnet schools

It’s an exciting time for Weaver and Kinsella high school students, who are preparing to transition to the new facility later this year. Some of them will be attending high school for the first time. The school is still going through its enrollment process. Right now, Dr. Torres-Rodriguez is looking into providing summer program opportunities to help students during this time of transition.

“When we thought about transitioning our rising ninth graders, we decided it was important to engage our community partners in helping us provide high school ‘bridge’ programs in the summer. There is a lot of excitement for us to support our students and our families throughout the transition,” says Dr. Torres-Rodriguez.

Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Torres-Rodriguez, and with support from the Hartford Board of Education, the Weaver Steering Committee and other partners, these students will now be able to receive the excellent education they deserve.