



Working as a Community to Address Overcrowding

By Tom Caputo

Belmont currently has an opportunity to leverage state funding to help our town build a new high school. As a member of the Belmont School Committee and the High School Building Committee, and as the parent of two Belmont students, I'd like to share some information about the state of our current high school.

Walk through the halls of Belmont High School, and it won't take you long to see evidence of overcrowding. Students fill the hallways and use every open space. Students cram themselves onto benches outside classrooms and sit on floors wherever possible. Many students wait in line to enter the library because it is filled to capacity and can't accommodate additional students.

Peek into a classroom and you will see desks squeezed into every available space. Re-configuring desks to accommodate collaborative work is nearly impossible. Science classes are conducted in classrooms designed to be used strictly for lab space but double as both classroom and lab space. The labs themselves are too small, so students crowd into these rooms and must wait in line to use the limited number of lab tables.

As you walk past classrooms, you will see that the limitations of the building have created classes that are larger than is ideal. The average BHS Honors English class has 26 students, Honors Math classes have an average of 27 students, and several classes are hitting the 30-student mark.

Stop by the cafeteria for lunch, a spot where students should be able to eat and socialize. The cafeteria at BHS was designed to feed 460 students during a lunch period. Today, the cafeteria must accommodate 700-770 students per lunch period. Many students no longer bother entering the cafeteria, as they have no place to sit. Additionally, for the first time this year, all teachers have one split class per week during the lunch period to help equalize the number of students having lunch at one time. This means that students go to class for 25 minutes, then leave and go to lunch for 25 minutes, and then return to class for the final 25 minutes. This is not optimal for teaching and learning but is necessary to accommodate the growing number of students.

Then there are free periods. Due to limited classroom space at BHS, there are, at times, approximately 700 students who have no designated space on campus for their "frees." With few quiet study areas available, students are relegated to benches placed throughout the halls, and any space, however imperfect for quiet or collaborative study, that they can find.

To try to keep up with skyrocketing enrollment, BHS has utilized modular classrooms and modified classroom spaces. A garage attached to the building has been converted into a large orchestra and music classroom, classrooms have been sub-divided to create small learning

community centers for special education, and storage closets are being used for tutoring. Every possible space within the high school is being utilized, often for a purpose for which it was not intended.

Overcrowding is not only about numbers. The way that we educate children has changed. The outdated, small, and inflexible classrooms of the 50-year-old building do not foster an environment that enhances the learning process, encourages innovation, and establishes positive relationships. Group collaboration, technology integration, and adaptive and project-based learning are several of the guiding principles for 21st century learning. Additionally, overcrowding greatly hinders our teachers as they provide differentiated instruction and assessment.

Student overcrowding exists not only in our high school, but throughout the district. Every school has made changes to accommodate the growing student population, from adding modular classrooms, to utilizing all available building space, to adding classes in several grades. Overcrowding in the schools is a community problem that impacts all of Belmont's students.

Please join me on Tuesday, December 12th at the Belmont High School Auditorium, tours at 6 PM and meeting at 7 PM for the next BHSBC Community Engagement Meeting. Let's all be part of this important process.

Tom Caputo is a member of the Belmont School Committee and a member of the Belmont High School Building Committee. To sign up for email updates and to learn more about the Belmont High School Building Project, including project timelines, videos, meeting schedules, presentations and more, please visit belmonthighschoolproject.org.

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