



SANTA MONICA - MALIBU UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

January 20, 2021

Superintendent's Message - Samohi Planning Update: Forward-looking Educational Programs and Facility Improvement Projects

During this unprecedented time in education imposed on us by Covid-19, the main focus of SMMUSD remains to provide the best instruction possible despite the numerous challenges. We are constantly working to improve distance learning, developing “plus” aspects to provide students on-campus experiences when safe, and planning for the summer and fall when we can address both learning loss and the social-emotional toll on our students. This is our priority. At the same time, we are also working on key initiatives and facility improvements throughout Santa Monica schools that will benefit our students for decades to come. In this letter we are sharing some of these initiatives.

When it comes to our campuses, we are able to make facility improvements thanks to Bond Measure SMS, which was overwhelmingly supported by Santa Monica voters. Since our facilities exist to enable high-quality learning that engages all of our students, we also want to share information about some of the innovative educational programs we are pursuing. Facility improvements will address badly needed physical improvements; they will also enable us to accommodate 21st-century teaching and learning.

The Board of Education will hear presentations about and discuss the Samohi Campus Plan and Samohi project-based learning programs at the next meeting, which will be held on Thursday, January 21, 2021 at 5 p.m. We invite you to join the meeting to learn more about the educational programs and the facility improvement projects that will support them. We always put the best interests of our current and future students at the forefront of our processes and decisions, while living within budget constraints.

Education is changing

Next generation learners are project-centered and the process of teaching is evolving in a way that necessitates a variety of new spaces for collaboration at different scales, access to new and innovative resources for oral and written communication and presentations, as well as robust and varied technology platforms. Methods of instruction have adapted to build on flexibility in learning that is student-led with teachers and support serving as coaches throughout problem-based exercises.

Classrooms, labs, specialized learning and innovation spaces for the future are needed to support the transition from a traditional teacher-led, front-of-the-classroom model for certain classes, to a decentralized, multi-zoned instructional model that provides a variety of spaces to enrich a collaborative culture for project-based work. This is an important distinction, and a shift from existing classroom designs. Some teaching environments will no longer be defined by a singular room configuration with student seats facing one instructional wall. The environments that will support this type of learning require varied indoor and outdoor spaces where students can effortlessly transition between learning spaces to pursue and develop their individual passions. Students will have access to broader and deeper resources where they can explore

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Board of Education: Keith Coleman • Craig Foster • Jon Kean • Maria Leon-Vazquez

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Superintendent: Dr. Ben Drati

their interests through flexible learning and hands-on project areas, empowering them to create and learn both inside and outside the classroom.

Size of classrooms and auxiliary spaces

As teaching changes, next generation learners need more space to learn. Small classrooms tend to only support students sitting at desks in rows. Next generation instruction employs differing physical setups to engage learners. The classroom needs to support presentation mode with desks in rows, small group learning in groups of four, individual learning, meeting in a large circle and sometimes having an open floor. The classrooms need differing zones to accommodate a variety of learning modes.

Contrary to some information posted, the district does not intend to use these larger classrooms to increase class sizes. The district has agreements with the Santa Monica-Malibu Classroom Teachers Association that govern class size. There are no plans to adjust these criteria upward. Bond funds cannot be used for teacher salaries. They can, however, be used to facilitate good teaching and to provide healthy physical environments that support both teachers and students.

Engagement and equity

The shifts we are making in educational programming and facility planning are driven by our mission statement: *Extraordinary achievement for all while simultaneously closing the achievement gap*. While moving toward project-based learning and a “whole child” approach will benefit all students, these educational advancements have the potential to better engage those students who are not being served by traditional education. Students learn differently and a “one style suits all” regimen leaves students out who do not excel at that one way of learning. The varied styles of learning that we are integrating allow students to align their learning to a mode where they can excel. Multi-modal learning also has the benefit of challenging all students to learn in ways that are outside their comfort zone and to expand their ways of working. All students must have the opportunity to excel and reach their own full potential.

This does not mean that education as we know it is completely changing. It is evolving in ways that improve opportunity and engagement for all students. Our excellent teachers will continue to teach excellently. As we continue to work on closing the achievement gap, while simultaneously enhancing the learning of all students, we embrace these new modalities as a change for the better. Better engagement. Better outcomes.

Samohi Campus Plan

The Samohi Campus Plan was initially developed in 2015 and 2016 through deep and open school site and community process. The Environmental Impact Report, including a historical resources analysis, was completed and approved in 2019. This was done through an open community engagement process. The plan reimagines the campus to serve student education for this next century. The plan addresses how learning is changing/will change and looks to adapt and build the facilities to support it.

- The Innovation building, opened in fall 2015, was the first step and was built prior to development of the Samohi Campus Plan (it could be called Phase 0). It provides high quality science labs, larger, more usable classrooms and decentralized administration.
- The Discovery building (Phases 1 & 2), currently under construction, is scheduled to be complete when students return to campus in August 2021. The first two phases of the campus plan, combined into one project, will provide an innovative educational space that allows for larger classrooms, breakout spaces for small groups, common spaces for individual and community learning, and a roof-top outdoor learning deck. The cafeteria, kitchen, pool and two underground levels of parking complete this large project. One of the innovations of the building is that it is designed to change. As learning models and priorities change, the interior can be reconfigured to support these changes over time.

Future leaders won't be forced to replace a building because it no longer serves students.

- Design of the Exploration building (Phase 3) is almost complete. It will provide state-of-the-art labs for the academies, including visual arts. This moves painting, drawing, photography, video production and ceramics from tiny dark classrooms to large, well-lit labs to expand instruction and allow for creation. The hands-on labs will include instructional spaces to better facilitate real-world instruction. Furthermore, the labs will be outfitted with state-of-the-art, industry-aligned equipment. The building features an outdoor learning area as well as a "pitch" space where students can present their work to their peers. The building is being designed on an open building concept that will allow it to be reconfigured as instructional needs change, much like the Discovery building.
- Phase 3 also includes the South gym replacement, called the Gold gym, which includes a two-court gymnasium, an auxiliary court, a full dance/pep squad studio, and yoga and fitness studios with outdoor areas.

Samohi History building

Like many in this community, we share an affinity for the buildings of our past. While we understand some of the impetus for recent efforts to save the History building, doing so runs counter to campus planning goals to improve educational spaces for today's and tomorrow's students, as described above. This was discussed at great length during the development of the Samohi Campus Plan and studied during the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) process. It is also so late in the process of campus revitalization that reconsidering would cause unacceptable lengthy delays and additional expenditures. The designers have spent well over a year designing Phase 3 and the district has already awarded the contract to demolish the History building.

While the History building may bring about fond memories for alumni, it is not accurate to classify it as a historical resource. The historical resources study performed by the Historic Resources Group as part of the Environmental Impact Report concluded that the building has been changed substantially since it was built in 1937 and "does not retain sufficient integrity to convey its significance as an individual resource."

Adaptive reuse of the building was considered, but rejected because the architecture of the building would require a complete gutting of the interior to meet today's educational needs, not to mention the HVAC and other building systems which have long needed replacement; the structure of the building that sits on top of the remains of the 1913 building destroyed in the 1933 Long Beach earthquake would have to be completely re-engineered to meet current structural and seismic safety requirements; and the placement and siting of the building could not support the needs of the overall campus plan. Therefore, even if the façade could be saved and restored to its former state, it would not work on the campus.

Responding to comments from the school and community, Prospect Hill will not be leveled. The leveling of Prospect Hill was initially planned to provide easier movement and accessibility across campus, but ultimately it will be retained at near its full elevation and designed to support movement and accessibility. The Samohi Campus Plan has always included keeping the English Building, modernizing the inside, converting its use to largely be the administration building, maintaining the Humanities Center, returning the 7th Street façade to its former glory, and creating a real "front door" for the school. Barnum Hall and the Greek Amphitheatre will remain with plans for some required accessibility upgrades, which will retain connections to the history of the campus.

Project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is an authentic learning experience achieved through deep engagement with high interest, relevant, real-world curriculum-related projects over an extended

period of time. Students have an opportunity to develop and demonstrate their knowledge and skills through a public product or presentation. It is often interdisciplinary and/or interest-based shifting instruction, demonstration, and content.

PBL is a viable pathway because we are seeing benefits of project choice and multiple modalities with students who have not been as successful in traditional learning as well as with students who have traditionally excelled in school.

We have initiated and continue to develop Samohi's Personalized Project-Based Learning (PPBL) Pathway at the Obama Center and the academy programs (previously called the "Capstone Program") that will be housed in Samohi's Exploration building (Phase 3):

- Personalized project-based learning (PPBL) at the Obama Center is an intensive program of individualized interest-based learning. This program connects with students who are creative and excel using alternative learning styles. This rigorous, standards-based program meets the students where they are and challenges them to apply learning to real world situations.
- There has been some criticism of the additional resources required to operate this program. This program requires additional start-up funds to develop. As it grows to maturity and increases the number of students it is serving, required resources will become more closely aligned with other instruction. The benefits that we are seeing with students who might not succeed as fully in traditional learning practice illustrate that this is a viable program. To learn more about this program please attend the Jan. 21 board of education meeting where there will be a study session on the PPBL program. Families of current 8th, 9th, and 10th graders are invited to learn about the program through information sessions in progress now. Information and sign up: <https://www.smmusd.org/ppbl>.

Samohi Principal Dr. Antonio Shelton and his team of teachers and administrators are developing the academy program as an extension of existing and needed classes. This approach promotes applied learning; it requires time and resources. The academy programs represent an expansion of several classes already being taught at Samohi. These programs employ an interdisciplinary approach that will provide Samohi juniors and seniors with real-life learning challenges in several fields. The four academies currently being developed include: (1) engineering and computer science; (2) health and wellness; (3) law, government, and public policy; and (4) media arts. Students will attend an academy in the morning or afternoon combining three subjects. Core subjects such as English or math will be taught with career-focused subjects. These capstone programs will be a culmination of a participating student's 12+ years of learning.

These programs cannot be effectively taught in traditional classrooms. New labs will challenge students and allow them to engage with tools to expand their learning. These programs are being adapted now. They will be offered in the Business building in Aug. 2021 prior to moving into the new Exploration building, which is scheduled to open in Aug. 2023. Students are excited about the opportunities to apply all they have learned to real world challenges. To learn more about this program please attend the Jan. 21 school board meeting where there will be a study session on the academies.

The desire and goal is to incorporate project-based learning concepts throughout the district at all levels, preschool-12th grade. In many ways it has been happening in classrooms for years. Acknowledging its success, we are expanding the program and working to provide the facilities and tools to expand the implementation of PBL.

Educating our students in world-class facilities is our priority and of high interest to parents, staff, and the community

The district's obligation is to provide the best education and the best educational facilities that it can. We encourage you to participate in the process. Your input is vital to help guide decisions.

I encourage you to stay informed. Please follow the progress online from district sources including the Facility Improvement Projects website that includes frequent construction updates and information on projects for each school. www.smmusd.org/FIP

Follow us on Twitter @smmusd (Main official SMMUSD Twitter) and @smmusdC (Official SMMUSD construction Twitter.) Parents and staff will receive email notices from school sites and the district regarding projects on each campus and opportunities to attend meetings and provide input. Community members may sign up for the district [community email list](#).

Parents, students, staff and community members may share their comments through our [Let's Talk](#) portal, email the school board at brd@smmusd.org, or through public comment at school board meetings. The district and school board read and listens to feedback, and considers it when making decisions, however, due to the volume of messages, may not always reply. We are listening and reading your comments and appreciate your ongoing support.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ben Drati, Superintendent