

# Wethersfield Elementary School Renovation Master Plan

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## Overview & FAQs

*Dated June 12, 2025*

### What were the goals?

1. Fully renovate or build new, as needed, all elementary schools.
2. Keep all five (5) elementary school sites.
3. Bring parity across all five (5) elementary schools: allowing for even enrollment and classroom populations and equitable school facilities.
4. Leverage the Samuel Webb Elementary School building, initially constructed to be used as an intermediate school, to be best utilized for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, bringing alignment with modern educational models. The building includes spaces that are only eligible for state reimbursement as an intermediate school, including large spaces for specialized classes, a large gymnasium, and an auditorium.
5. Construct a new swing school first to reduce the construction impact on students and significantly speed up the process.

### What is the Master Plan?

Funding for steps #1-4 and #7 will be included in an initial referendum.

1. Construct a new K-4 Highcrest Elementary School on the Kycia Farm property. It will include the district's preschool facilities.
2. Convert Samuel Webb Elementary School into an Intermediate School for 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> graders.
3. All 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> graders attend Webb School.
4. Renovate Charles Wright Elementary School for K-4.

Funding for steps #5 & #6 will be included in a second referendum. This will allow for more accurate cost projections and planning purposes.

5. Renovate Emerson-Williams Elementary School for K-4.
6. Renovate Hanmer Elementary School for K-4.
7. Demolish the old Highcrest Elementary School and restore green space.

While each school is being renovated, that student population will populate the current Highcrest Elementary School.

## FAQs

### Why do we need to renovate our elementary schools?

- The issues for our elementary schools go beyond what could be achieved with regular maintenance. Most towns in Connecticut with schools constructed in the 1950/60s have already or are in the process of creating building renovation plans. Wethersfield is in a similar position where the school buildings are deemed “beyond their expected useful lives” and all major systems need full replacement. Remediation of potential environmental hazards such as asbestos is needed throughout.
- Safety upgrades are a top priority. Many of our elementary schools were built before fire protection sprinkler systems existed, which was an era that required all classrooms to have exterior doors. The buildings need to be re-designed to align with modern state-mandated safety standards including minimal exterior doors and “man traps” designed to allow administration to credential visitors at the main entrances.
- Complete renovations/new construction of our elementary schools would create an opportunity to redesign and expand the square footage:
  - Temporary classroom portable units have been in use at some of our elementary schools for years, even decades, due to lack of space.
  - Some classrooms currently house 25+ students due to the lack of classrooms available.
  - Some special services staff members (occupational therapy, behavioral therapy, social work, etc.) have had to provide services to students in former closets, stage areas, etc.
- Keeping all five (5) elementary schools in a K-6 model creates two (2) larger schools with 3-4 classes per grade and three (3) smaller schools with 2-3 classes per grade. With occasional population “bumps”, this arrangement creates significant discrepancies in classroom population sizes. Realignment to four (4) K-4 schools eliminates this common scenario.
- Redesigning the elementary schools to create a dedicated 5-6 school was a key priority. These grades require a different school design, compared to K-4, due to a curriculum that includes specialized classes such as chorus, orchestra, health, etc. as well as leveled math instruction. The large gymnasium with locker rooms and full auditorium with stage will be best utilized with this student population.

### What other scenarios were considered?

- Adding a wing for a town-wide 6<sup>th</sup> grade at the Silas Deane Middle School was not an option due to lack of space.
- Consolidating into four (4) elementary schools was considered because of the cost efficiencies but the neighborhood school model was strongly supported.

- Expanding preschool classrooms to all elementary schools is not currently possible due to lack of state and district resources.
- Building the swing school for the Hanmer population at the Stillman/BOE property was considered and, due to the Historic District Commission's lengthy approval process, not selected.
- Renovating a school while students are in the building would come at a greater expense to the town and lengthen the duration of the projects. There is no space or building in town that could accommodate the necessary number of students during renovations.
- Using temporary trailers as swing space was not logistically or economically feasible.
- The Cedar Street parcel is less than a quarter mile from Webb and a half mile from Emerson-Williams. It is not desirable to have three (3) school sites so close geographically.
- While the Pitkin Center was formerly a school, it is no longer being used as a school so re-using this site as a swing school would trigger state code upgrading requirements. Additionally, the building is too small to hold our populations and currently houses the Senior Center.
- The option of "maintain only" was deeply explored. It was determined that the basic necessary updates needed for all five elementary school buildings would cost at least \$66 million and would take between five (5) and ten (10) years to complete, as most of the updates would need to happen while students are not in the building. The town would need approval to borrow/bond the funds through a referendum. The state would only pay for a small portion of the renovations, approximately \$10 million, namely for safety and HVAC upgrades. Renovations WOULD include roofing, electrical systems, mechanical systems, and safety upgrades. Renovations WOULD NOT include any changes to layout or design of the buildings, no additional spaces or classrooms, hazardous remediation work, window replacement, no new furniture, fixtures, equipment, interior finishes (flooring, paint, etc.), sidewalks, asphalt paving, playgrounds, etc.

### **How does state financing/reimbursement work with school renovations?**

New and renovated school projects are typically funded through the State's school construction grant program. Schools in Wethersfield that are "renovated as new" are usually eligible for 56% reimbursement from the State. In other words, the Town of Wethersfield would be responsible for paying 44% of the project. Schools that are newly constructed are usually eligible for 46% reimbursement from the State and Wethersfield would be responsible for paying 54% of the project.

However, as of June 4, 2025, our State Legislative Delegation confirmed that the State will reimburse the Town of Wethersfield 76.79% of the cost to build the new Highcrest school, and 71.79% of the cost to renovate both the Samuel Webb and Charles Wright schools. This is a much higher State reimbursement for our town than expected and will translate to significant savings for the town and taxpayers.

### **How will school buildings be maintained in the future after schools are renovated?**

When a school is newly constructed or fully renovated, all the systems (roofing, building envelope, mechanicals, all interior finishes, etc.) will have a minimum 20-year warranty. Physical Services will continue their regular maintenance schedules and planning, and the Town should anticipate continuing to fund them on an ongoing basis.

**Does the State require municipalities to build schools on lots bigger than Charles Wright?** No, the state does not require a specific lot size. TSKP and Downes Construction have designed and built schools in urban and suburban areas where the space was limited.

**Does the Board of Ed anticipate a decrease or increase in enrollment?**

Enrollment projections indicate stable enrollment with limited growth.

**How will my taxes be affected by this school building plan?**

Currently, with the debt on the High School renovation project on the decline, the Town is in a good financial position to borrow/bond for this project. The Finance Director will have final costs and estimated annual tax impact on the average home before a referendum vote and this information will be shared with each resident through an informational mailing.

**How and when will students be redistricted to each school as the plan builds out?**

The Board of Education will be handling the redistricting plan that will take place following the completion of the Samuel Webb school renovation. More details to come.

**What is the estimated timeline of the Master Plan?**

- Referendum #1 will take place September 2025.
- Construction for the New Highcrest Elementary will begin Winter/Spring 2027.
- New Highcrest Elementary will be complete for the 2028/2029 school year.
- Samuel Webb Elementary will be complete for the 2029/2030 school year.
- Charles Wright Elementary will be complete for the 2030/2031 school year.
- Referendum #2 will target September 2028.
- Emerson-Williams Elementary will be complete for the 2031/2032 school year.
- Hanmer Elementary will be complete for the 2032/2033 school year.