

## West Fargo Public Schools: The District of Choice Since 1876

At the start of the 2016-17 school year, West Fargo Public Schools has over 10,000 students enrolled for the first day of classes. This is a drastic change from recent years, and even more extreme considering where the district started from 140 years ago. Our enrollment continues to grow, as does our city. The district has not only grown in enrollment, but also in physical size and the number of employees. About 2,000 employees work in the district's 20 buildings – 17 schools, one district office, one bus garage, and one maintenance building – to serve and educate thousands of students every day. West Fargo Public Schools has proven itself to be the district of choice, not only today, but also 140 years ago when the district was first established.

The district of West Fargo Public Schools was first recognized at an organizational meeting held October 9, 1876 in the current area of Dakota Territory. A group of individuals, including Mr. A.A. Deacon, Mr. G. Fromke, and Mr. C. Farrell, voted to build the district's first schoolhouse at the cost of \$500. The schoolhouse was to be built at the "northwest quarter 17, township 139, range 49" or what is now known as the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Sheyenne Street.

The following January, the first teacher was hired for the winter term. Miss Nina Hall was to begin January 3 and would receive a \$40 salary, along with room and board provided by the district. At the time, 61 students lived in the district; however, Miss Hall's first class was quite small at just 14 students. There were not any compulsory education laws in 1877, so it was no surprise that the majority of families opted out of sending their children to school. Children did not attend school for a nine-month period; instead, school was held during a summer term

(May-July) and a winter term (November-February). Students then had breaks during the busier spring planting and fall harvest seasons.

Enrollment at the district continued to increase, and in 1910, the district built Fairview School on the west side of the district near Highway 10. Both schools continued to operate until 1923 when North School was built with two classrooms and one gymnasium near Main Avenue and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. First through fourth grades were housed in the south classroom and fifth through eighth grades used the north classroom. This was the district's first brick and mortar school. One janitor and two teachers, including the widely-admired Mrs. Jennie Colby, were employed at the school. Due to the arrival of the Farmers' Cooperative Packing Company, enrollment continued to rise through the 1920s and North School eventually turned its gym into more classroom space.



*Students at North School, 1924.*

In the fall of 1933, the district was painfully overcrowded at North School. The School Board addressed the issue by building an addition on to the school that was ready for the fall of 1935. The addition provided a library and four more classrooms, which the district believed would meet their needs for many years to come. However, just four years later the district was again facing a shortage of space.

The Union Stockyards arrived in West Fargo during the early 1930s and many employees of Armour & Company chose to live in the district. At the time, the district did not offer high school classes. Instead, students who wished to continue their



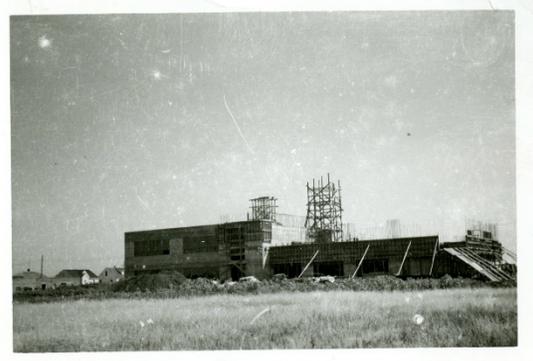
*West Fargo High School Faculty, 1936.*

education after the eighth grade either transferred to Fargo Central High School, enrolled in a parochial school, or attended NDSU's High School Academy. Considering the needs of the students, working families, and the local industries, the school board and superintendent decided to add a ninth grade class in 1935. A new grade level was added to the district for each of the next three years, resulting in a full high school program, and the district's first graduating class, in 1939. It was these factors that pushed enrollment beyond capacity and led the School Board to make a radical decision to address their space shortage in 1938.

That year the School Board decided to move Fairview School to the North School campus to alleviate crowding issues. In 1939, the School Board chose to hold a school bond election in order to build a new facility at the corner of what is now 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. After the bond passed, consultations were held with architects and the Works Project



*First Day of Construction on West Fargo High School (looking NE), January 1939.*



*Construction of West Fargo High School, 1939.*

Administration with the hopes of creating the district's first high school. Construction on the monolithic concrete structure began in late winter 1939 with more than 100 workers employed in the project. Concrete was used as the primary material because it allowed for a higher percentage of unskilled workers, who were paid \$40 a month in comparison to \$80 a month for skilled workers. Near the end of the construction, the district ran out of funds to complete the project. In order to finish the gymnasium portion of the project, a bond referendum was brought to the

community. The bond passed with not only a large percentage of support, but without a single opposing vote. The gymnasium and the rest of the school were completed and the building was dedicated in March of 1941. North School then became an elementary school and the district had one elementary and one high school.



*West Fargo High School, early 1940s.*

Rapid growth in nearby areas continued to cause space problems for the district. A second elementary school, South Elementary, was built in 1952. The high school, at just 13 years old, received its first addition of more classrooms and a superintendent's office in 1954. Yet another addition followed in 1959 when a gymnasium, multipurpose room, lavatories, locker rooms, industrial art shops, and heating plant were built on the school's south side. The addition also remodeled the old gymnasium into two floors that held the principal's office, library, and classrooms. These additions would transform the building into what we now know as Lodoen Community Center. South Elementary was not immune to expansion, as it received additional classroom space in 1956 and an even larger addition of classrooms, lavatories, and a multipurpose room in 1962. Between 1951 and 1967, 107 sections of land were added to the original 15 sections, totaling 122 sections within district boundaries as we moved into the 1970s.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the district made changes and additions beyond physical space. The high school's football team transitioned from an eight-man to an eleven-man team in 1950. The high school's first wrestling team was created for the 1960-61 school year. That same year, the district's enrollment had climbed high enough for West Fargo High School to become a Class A school and gain membership and accreditation through the North Central Association. The choir department expanded to have its first full time director in 1963. The

American Field Service Chapter was also organized, allowing West Fargo High to host its first foreign exchange student (David Richards, Australia) during 1963-64. The high school expanded its track and field program by hiring a full time coach in the early 1960s and constructing a new track for the spring of 1965.

The North Dakota Legislature made some decisions during this time that greatly impacted West Fargo and the surrounding community. In 1963, the North Dakota House created Bill 844 which said that any school district that was no longer operating needed to dissolve and attach to a neighboring district. Between West Fargo and Fargo lay district #35, which had not operated a school since 1941. When district #35 closed its one-room schoolhouse in 1941, the residents decided to sell the schoolhouse and use the money to pay the tuition of its few students to attend Fargo. This financial arrangement then made it possible for the area to have zero school taxes, leaving it attractive to local businesses. Eventually, the sight would include many heavy equipment dealers and the area's largest shopping center, West Acres. When the North Dakota



legislature passed Bill 844, the majority of district #35 became part of West Fargo School District. The district gained only one student from this addition, but gained over \$1 million in taxable valuation. Later, in 1973, the state passed Bill 1180, which indefinitely froze the school boundaries between West Fargo and Fargo.

The 1960s saw the first West Fargo High School graduating class of more than a hundred students. The following decade saw the first graduating class of more than two hundred students. It was during this twenty-year period when the community of West Fargo grew exponentially, leaving the district with no choice but to build, build, and build! South Elementary saw an

extensive addition in 1961 that doubled the school's size. The district added its first middle school in 1968, as educational theory of the time believed that students of that age required special attention and specific teaching and learning techniques. L.E. Berger Middle School was built with a unique open classroom design that allowed for more flexibility in the movement of space and furniture. The plan was to do away with the traditional role of the teacher leading from the front of the class, and instead gave students more opportunities to work in groups, learn through movement, and allow the teacher to become an interactive facilitator and leader. Five years later, the district's third elementary school, Eastwood Elementary, was built on a similar model and architectural plan. Also in 1973, West Fargo High School (Lodoen Community Center), underwent its third addition. Public kindergarten was brought to the state of North Dakota in 1975, but districts had to financially support the program without aid from the state. The community of West Fargo and the school district gathered the money and support for the program, and started public kindergarten at West Fargo Public Schools for the first time in the fall of 1975. With this addition to the district, what was North Elementary School for grades 1-5 became home to all district kindergarten students and district-level administrators. Grade 1-5 students dispersed out to neighboring elementary schools.

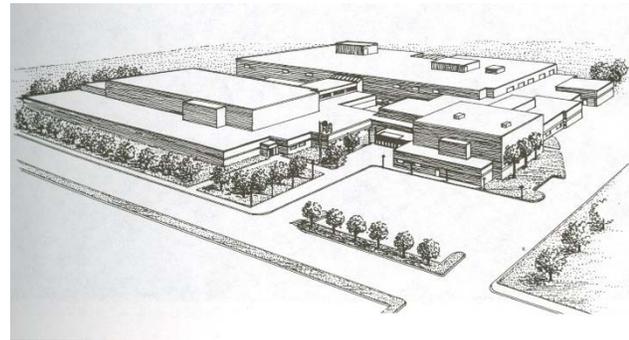
Some of the district's busiest years in history occurred in 1976 and 1977, when six major projects were completed. The West Fargo Vocational Education Center was constructed in 1976 on the southeast side of the West Fargo High School. Throughout the community, there was a discussion being led by the League of Women Voters regarding the need for recreational space in the city. After gaining \$500,000 in government funds, two additional bond referendums were passed to build a \$1 million pool at L.E. Berger Middle School. The pool was an indoor-outdoor pool with retractable walls and was only the second one of its kind when it opened in the spring

of 1976. The district also addressed its increasing transportation department by building a bus barn to house school buses. The next year saw the completion of two elementary schools within the district's boundaries. Harwood, situated seven miles north on the district's northernmost border, received one elementary school and Westside Elementary was built on the west side of town. West Fargo Public Schools moved into the 1980s with one high school, one middle school, four elementary schools, and one district office and kindergarten center building.

After the building rush of 1976-77, West Fargo Public Schools experienced a five-year plateau of enrollment. Each senior class was averaging 190 graduates, but enrollment projections showed an increasing student population in the near future. Eastwood Elementary and Westside Elementary both received an addition in 1983 that doubled the size of the schools. Harwood Elementary also received its first addition, while South Elementary received its third that year. Horace Elementary was built in the Horace community, five miles south on the district's southernmost border. This put the district's total number of schools at eight buildings at the end of 1983 and allowed for redistricting throughout the district. Kindergarten moved from North School to neighborhood elementary schools. North School continued to hold district offices on the first floor, and added Community High School, the district's alternative high school, to the space on the second floor.

With five elementary schools in the district, the school board spent the next couple of years determining what direction West Fargo Public Schools should take for the future. The elementary schools were conveniently located and comfortably filled with students. Now the questions and concerns turned towards the middle school and the high school. It would not be long until the students in all five elementaries would be entering the halls of West Fargo Middle School and eventually West Fargo High School. There simply was not enough room for all those

students at the secondary level; a solution had to be found. A bond election was held in 1984, but failed to pass. The West Fargo High School yearbook, *The Yearling*, discussed the spacing issues and the bond in that year's edition. While they were already dealing with early classes and crowded hallways and classrooms, the potential for even more early classes, crowded hallways, and possible portable classrooms was not how they hoped to spend their high school years.



*Plans for the new West Fargo High School, 1985.*

Another bond occurred that winter and passed, allowing for a new high school to be built in 1986. The new high school was 118,000 square feet and housed grades 10-12. The old high school became the district's middle school as L.E. Berger was converted to an additional elementary school. By this time, the graduating classes of West Fargo High School were consistently around 220 students. Like West Fargo Public Schools' history, that number would continue to climb as years progressed.



*The opening of the new West Fargo High School, 1986.*

The 1990s can be considered as some of the district's slower years, with no new schools being constructed, and just a few remodeling projects taking place. A 121,000 square-foot addition in 1992 to West Fargo High School provided a new theater, Career and Technical Education space, classrooms, and an expanded gymnasium. With the added square footage to the building, the district's ninth grade students moved from the middle school to the high school. This addition also allowed the previous vocational education center to be remodeled in 1993 to become the Early Childhood Center. In 1998, the district built a second building at the bus barn facilities to allow for additional bus storage. Near the end of the decade, the district graduated its

first senior class of more than 300 students. This pushed the district into the new century with a forecast of long-term, continued growth and increasing needs.

Although it was apparent by the early 2000s that the West Fargo community was growing in size, very few people would have been able to predict the intense changes that the district would have to endure through the next decade. Between the years of 2000-2010, the district completed 16 projects that included additions, renovations, and the construction of new buildings. West Fargo's growth became unprecedented throughout North Dakota, as we were now one of the fastest growing districts in the state.

The Leidal Education Center was built in 2000 just south of the original North Elementary School on Main Avenue. North School was demolished to make room for a parking lot to service the Leidal Education Center. The new LEC continued to hold Community High School and the district-level administrators, just as North School had previously done. In 2001, the district built its third, and final, building at the bus barn facilities.

West Fargo Public Schools brought forth a special election on March 26, 2002, asking voters to approve a \$31 million bond referendum. The referendum passed and allowed for the building of a new middle school, converting all elementary schools to grades 1-5 buildings, and renovating L.E. Berger, Eastwood, Harwood, Horace, South, and Westside Elementary Schools to accommodate increasing enrollment.

The kindergarten center and all six elementary schools received their renovations and additions during 2002-2004. L.E. Berger Elementary added classrooms to the east and renovated the administration, media center, music, and special education spaces. Eastwood Elementary gained two music rooms, a kitchen, commons, and classroom space. The school remodeled its entire east wing and converted two classrooms to small group rooms. Renovations were done to

Harwood Elementary's administration, workroom, lounge, and media center spaces and walls were reconstructed so that some classrooms had permanent separation. Horace Elementary received a classroom addition on the west side in order to replace portable classrooms that were in place and also added further gym space. A new media center was built at South Elementary, as well as renovations to the commons, administration, and music spaces. Westside Elementary received a new gym and a classroom addition. The Early Childhood Center also gained a small addition to accommodate the growing number of young students coming into the district. All elementary schools received upgrades in technology, security, and finishes, and were made fire, safety, and ADA compliant.

During the building phase of this bond package, the L.E. Berger pool also received substantial remodeling to rehabilitate the basin and mechanical systems, remove the operable kalwall panels, and remove an outdoor wading pool. Cheney Middle School opened in 2004, which relocated all the district's middle school students to the new building. After a successful \$27 million bond referendum in February 2005, the previous middle school underwent substantial remodeling; the West Fargo School Building Authority converted the space for use as a community building that included the West Fargo Public Library and West Fargo HeadStart. The building then became known as the Lodoen Community Center.

The 2005 bond referendum also allowed the district to build Aurora Elementary and Sheyenne 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Center, and add kindergarten classrooms to the Early Childhood Center. Aurora Elementary and the Sheyenne 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Center both opened in the fall



*The construction of Aurora Elementary, 2006.*



*One of the first walls being built for Sheyenne 9th Grade Center, June 2006.*



*Construction on the Sheyenne 9th Grade Center Commons, January 2007.*

of 2007; with the opening of Sheyenne, all of the district's ninth grade students were moved from West Fargo High School to the new school building on the south side of town.

An addition to the Early Childhood Center was completed in 2008 and allowed the building to accommodate full-day kindergarten. Its name then changed to Lodoen Kindergarten Center. When the district moved to full-day kindergarten, a need grew for space so that the same number of students could be educated for double the amount of time. Osgood Kindergarten Center was built in 2009 to house kindergarten students who lived south of I-94. Just two years later, the building received an addition of eight classrooms and a gymnasium to accommodate the ever-increasing population of southern West Fargo.



*Construction of Osgood Kindergarten Center, 2009.*

In 2009 and 2010, West Fargo Public Schools attempted to pass a bond referendum through community voting. The 2009 bond, at \$65 million, and the 2010 bond, at \$40 million, both failed to pass with 60% or more of the vote. On May 24, 2011, the West Fargo community again went to the polls to vote for another bond referendum. This time, the \$82.5 million proposal passed with 70% support. The bond package called for a south side elementary school, a south side middle school, additions to Sheyenne 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Center, renovations at West Fargo High School, and one additional elementary school whose location would be determined based on need at a later date.

Work on the bond package projects began almost immediately with the Leidal Education Center receiving an addition that provided space for the district's technology staff and program coordinators. The district administrators remained in the building, but Community High School then relocated to the Lodoen Community Center, which had briefly held a portion of the district's middle school students as part of an alternative STEM program. West Fargo High School received its second substantial addition that year when fitness spaces and a renovated kitchen were completed. Changes also occurred on the district's operational side when the bus barn was remodeled and the maintenance building gained a large freezer and cooler space.

Freedom Elementary joined the district in 2012 as another school on the southern portion of the district. At this point in time, the district had a kindergarten center, five elementary schools, one middle school, one alternative high school, and one high school on the north side of town. The south side of the district now had one kindergarten center, three elementary schools, and one ninth grade center. Shortly thereafter, Osgood Kindergarten Center received a small addition of two classrooms. The district's second middle school, Liberty Middle School, soon entered the ranks of southern facilities when it opened for the 2013-14 school year.

At the time Liberty Middle School opened, the district's enrollment was sitting at an astonishing number of 8,544 students. Increases in enrollment were now being felt across the board and not just at the elementary level. With two separate middle schools, it seemed that the district would have to split in to two separate high schools as well. A plan was formulated that would eventually leave all students on the north side of I-94 in our northern schools, including West Fargo High School, and all students on the south side of I-94 in our southern schools, including the district's future second high school. In 2013-14, Sheyenne 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Center began the transition to become a fully-immersed high school. That year, south side 10<sup>th</sup> graders

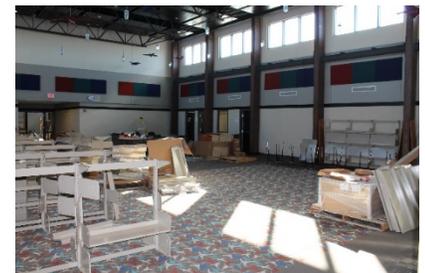
remained in the building and those same students were to remain until graduation in 2016; this would slowly transition the school in to Sheyenne High School for the 2015-16 school year. To accommodate this increase in students, a massive addition was completed in 2013 that nearly doubled Sheyenne's size. Subsequent changes were made in 2014 that provided the building new theatre and gym space.

Yet another elementary school was added to the southeast side of the district in the fall of 2014 when Independence Elementary opened. And again, another elementary school, Legacy Elementary, opened in time for the 2015-16 school year. This rounded out a thirteen-year period where the district had no choice but to build, build, and build. The district now stands with 20 total buildings: one district office, one bus garage, one maintenance building, two kindergarten centers, ten elementary schools, two middle school, two high schools, and one alternative high school. Yet, this has proven to not be enough for West Fargo Public Schools as we continue, even fourteen decades since our creation, to be the district of choice.

On November 17, 2015 West Fargo Public Schools and the West Fargo community made history when a \$98.1 million bond referendum was voted on in a special election and passed with 79.67% of voters voting in support of the proposed bond package. Not only did we make history with one of the highest-supported bond referendums in district history, but we made history with the largest bond referendum ever passed in the state of North Dakota. The bond package contains more than a dozen major projects, including the transitioning of kindergarten students to



*Independence Elementary, 2014.*



*Construction of Legacy Elementary School's Media Center, August 2015.*

neighborhood schools and renovations/additions to L.E. Berger Elementary, West Fargo High School, Horace Elementary, Cheney Middle School, Lodoen Community Center, Osgood Kindergarten Center, and the nutrition service warehouse. Also included in the package are a new transportation facility, a swimming pool and community center, an indoor hockey rink, and an elementary school on both the north and south side of I-94. These projects began shortly after winter in 2016 and will all be completed for the 2018-19 academic year.

West Fargo Public Schools is currently the district of choice for the 10,000 students, and their families, that are enrolled for this year. We will be the district of choice for the projected 500-600 students who will enroll each year for the next decade. And, when the next ten years have passed, we will be the district of choice for the nearly 15,000 students, and their families, who will be enrolled for the 2024-25 school year. How different will the district be ten years from now with an additional 5,000 students? No one can say for sure. What we can say is that as a district, we will diligently work every day to educate today's learners for tomorrow's world.

Compiled and written by:

S. Hansen

Communications & Community Relations Specialist

West Fargo Public Schools

© 2016

## Sources

Bicentennial West Fargo-Riverside History Book Committee. *Thru the Years to '76*. Fargo: J & M Printing, 1976. Print.

West Fargo High School. *The Yearling*. West Fargo: West Fargo Public Schools, 1946. Print.

West Fargo High School. *West Fargo High School Directory*. West Fargo: West Fargo Public Schools, 1963. Print.

West Fargo High School. *West Fargo High School Directory*. West Fargo: West Fargo Public Schools, 2003. Print.

West Fargo Public Schools. *2015 Long Range Facility Planning: November 17 Bond Referendum*. West Fargo: West Fargo Public Schools, 2015. Print.

West Fargo Public Schools. *Facility Information*. West Fargo: West Fargo Public Schools, 2013. Print.

\*Photographs collected from the West Fargo Historical Society in West Fargo, ND