Joel Weiler- Interview with Betsy Biller, Assistant Superintendent, and former communications director for Hillsboro School District 1J.

May 24, 2002 Approximately 2:30 to 3:50, w/ interruptions

JW: What was your fist involvement with Century High School?

BB: My first involvement with Century was in 1992 when I became communications director for the school district, and at that time we were getting overcrowded in secondary schools. I had to form and run a task force that was called "the school crowding task force", and their job was to identify various alternatives to the crowding, alternatives we could put into place short and long term, things like extending the day, going to a double or a triple shift, going to year round school, leasing additional estates and so on. We took that task for material and went out into the community and got feedback from folks, and ended up with a proposal that we used until we were able to build Century, but in the meantime we also built the community enthusiasm for putting a bond up again and trying to get enough money to build the high school.

JW: Now were you around when the first bond failed?

BB: I was around, but I was the vice principal at one of the schools, and that first bond not only had Century on it, it had an expansion of Hilhi and Glencoe on it, and it was at a time when finances in the school district were about as bad as they are right now as we enter these budget cuts and so there was absolutely no way in the world that a large bond measure was going to pass.

JW: Okay, and... could you tell us how they obtained the land?

BB: Yes, in the eighties they purchased land, according to the Vortz practice of always having the land available before you need to have it for building. They purchased land near the airport and when the airport was expanded it was no longer, our land was no longer considered suitable for a school site. We couldn't build based on restrictions and codes. We sold that property and it's now an apartment complex and with that money we were able to buy what became the land for Century High School. There were a couple of private homes on it that we had to buy as well and we were lucky to be able to find a parcel of land that was flat and build-able and in a location that was suitable for our enrollment growth needs. At that time if we had bought land out where we're building Liberty, it would not have been where we had crowding, and it would not have helped us as much

JW: Okay, how did you see your roll as helping Century succeed?

BB: My roll for Century to succeed was all at the front end. It was before Century was Century. Things that I was involved in was the school crowding task force, which helped the other schools until we could build a new one, identifying the need to build this school,

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doing the information effort that was necessary with the parents and the community in order for them to recognize the need and be willing to say 'yeah we're willing to pay the taxes to build this school'. Not part of my job, but part of something that I did was work on my own time with the campaign committee that put together the effort to convince people. I had to inform them but I couldn't say please vote yes, that's against the law. But on a personal side, I could work nights and weekends with the campaign committee and put the materials together that said, 'you have the information now please vote yes'. I worked with the attorneys on putting together the legal language that went onto the ballot. I worked with the bond council, again that's a set of attorneys, in terms of how we were going to sell this publicly. And then, once we had it, I organized the groundbreaking ceremony, and I organized and ran the school name task force; come up with the name of the school. And then finally once the kids and the staff were in it, I was a member of the committee for the dedication. Other than that, I was not involved in the curricular planning, or the facility planning or the staff planning.

JW: What did you do in your planning with the dedication and everything?

BB: I brought a lot of materials. Let's... can we go in kind of chronological order how we did some of this stuff on planning, if that's okay with you? I have not had a chance to go through all of my files, and the part that I have not gone through yet, and I'll make sure you get it, are the materials that lead up to the bond measure on the ballot.

(Explaining several files)

CAMPAIGN FILES

So, things like, how was it legally explained, and how did it show up in the voters pamphlet, and so on, I'll get you that material. This however, is a flyer that we used, and it went in every student, their back to school packet in August, so that the parents had basic information. We, remember, were not allowed to say, 'vote yes', we weren't allowed to be emotional about it at all. But this was our enrollment from 1987 to 1995, we were in 1994 and we could see that district wide we were going to surpass our capacity in 1995. And it was a little uneven, it was more crowded in some schools than in other schools. Like Thomas had 1100 kids at Thomas. Poynter didn't have as many kids, but we were maxing out every where. Then we had the main questions and answers, we covered the community with virtually this same information, with posters in all the stores and merchants let us put those in their windows. Then, the one mailing that the campaign committee did was this, it went to every postal patron, and it says... 'We have some good news and some bad news, first the bad news... One of the biggest challenges is getting a seat in class... And now the good news... we're going to build a new high school." This is Century's advertising for the bond. We sent it in the Argus and we sent it with certain areas of the Oregonian distribution, and then we walked neighborhoods that we knew were high voter precinct areas and handed them out. So, we didn't have enough money to mail them to everyone. So that's what I brought for you in terms of getting it off the ground.

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PLANNING FILES

magnat Then, I brought a file on planning for Century, and what I brought was the announcement that Phil Barnekoff was being replaced, because he had been at Hilhi. I brought the new school timeline, the things that would happen in the new school. This is a project grid that we used for planning Century, so that you see that the major task has to do with... Plan and design the facility: and you can see that all the way out how it's planned. Another major task, resolve program issues impacting a new high school, what kinds of classes are going to be taught here?... what magnate programs are going to be here?... they had to be done very, very early because those decisions impacted how you built the school, what you had in the school. Develop a plan for grade and program reconfiguration: at that time we had junior high schools, we had to plan for those junior highs to become middle schools, and for Century, Hilhi, and Glencoe to get ninth graders. So it wasn't just something that affected Century, it was something that affected all the secondary schools all at one time. Identify school attendance areas: that was special. Develop a staffing plan: some people absolutely would just give their eye- teeth to go to a brand new school. They want to be on the front end and they want to be on the planning team, not everyone can be on the planning team, some of them need to apply later on to get some of the jobs to fill it out. Provide budget and fiscal: you have to keep very, very close records of thirty five million dollars. And so this whole thing is the planning, that includes, right down to, communicate with the community, staff and students so that you have a name for the new school and hold a groundbreaking ceremony, and so on. So that's the planning.

After Century was built it received national awards for its' design, here's some information about that. As we were building it, of course if you ask tax payers to give you their money you can't just take it and ignore them the rest of the time, you have to give them information... so we took the most frequently asked questions and we would send these out to the public or have public meetings about it as we were building it. This one, this was Hilhi's vote, for the color and mascot, that was the only school that I could find but I thought that was kind of interesting. And then I have several articles, which you probably have, 'Century going high tech', then there was a series of four articles written by Jillian Gayner the first year, she hung out here, she got to know the kids, she got to know the teachers, and this is a four part series that she did. 'Starting from Scratch', it was a three part series, and it talks about what it's like to be at a brand new school and have to try to start new traditions and the juniors are here a little lost in this new school. So that was planning, okay?

NAMING FILES

Then I have the naming, and first off, as soon as we passed the bond, Witch Hazel Elementary school kids sent a letter to their Superintendent, Mr. Gillespie, that said 'we want to name this school' and we responded back to them that the whole community all the way out at Lennox and North Plains are paying for it and they get to help take part, but we will ask you. Then I have letters asking various groups to join us on the task force to name the school, and so you can see the chamber of commerce, because the business community had to help us pass the bond. This is a news release that we put out saying that we are looking for suggestions on the name. And then this is an agenda that we used for the meeting, and we have to approve names of facilities by policy we can't just pick a

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whim and name a school, we have to follow policy. And I had to report to the board of directors how we were going to be doing this, so that's a formal report to the board, with the timeline of what we were going to follow. And then I had the members of the task force commute information about when the meetings would be, and then we asked the principals at each of the elementary schools and some other people to help us with some recommendations. This is the form we used, asking them to send in their recommendation for name. And, this is where it gets fun, here we get the names and you've got 18 pages of names, and the reasons that people gave them. So we took every one of these that we got and it's here, and it's interesting stuff. After we had had another meeting, we then selected, we paired it down and we selected Century High School, Simon Reed High School, Horizon, and Heritage. And we put it back out on a news release, Chahalam, Reedville, Oregon Trail, and Lewis & Clark, those were our top, I think, eight. Put it out, said 'please tell us what you think about it', and we again sent it out to everybody, we tried to include every one and 'what do you think about these schools?' and we had another task force meeting, and we identified what we wanted in the name, what the name needed to convey for us. So we then had all of those eight names, and we had all of those eight names and we had, kind of the pros' and cons on what you think about when you hear those names, and the media carried articles on it. Then it was interesting, because in a national magazine, there was an article about naming this school and one of the names was Century High, and I thought that was kind of interesting at the same time. Here are copies of the submissions of Century High School, I saved them, Ms. Mabry is one of the ones who suggested that it be Century High School. We also had that from a vice principal who is know longer here. Here's Horizon, a teacher at Hilhi, a teacher at Hilhi, Mr. Barnekoff recommending Horizon, Susan Friez, she's your registrar, I think she has a different last name now, Horizon, you know maybe she's gone now but she was here. Heritage High, because those were the three finalists, Century, Horizon, and Heritage. There was a young lady on the task force, she was an 8th grader, she made the presentation to the board of directors about the names, they said to her, 'What would you name it?' and she said 'Well I'd name it Century' and they did. And that's basically how you got your name. And I was out of town when she did that, and that wasn't the name I would have selected- but it was amazing that as soon as she had decided, they were fine with it.

JW: So basically it all came down to that girl?

BB: That girl... Courtney... Pine, just was, innocently said 'Well I like Century' (laughs), and they did it! The groundbreaking ceremony, as soon as we had the name we planned the groundbreaking ceremony, this was the note card, and inside the note card was this, that was the invitation to have people come. This was the speech, that... I think Phil, Mr. Barnekoff said, I think. Then here is the banner that we had made, you didn't have school colors yet, so we did it in crimson, bright red, and gold. We have an article about the groundbreaking. And here's the speech by the board chairman at the groundbreaking. Finally, for the dedication we put together packets like this, and in it, oh, first of all, this is what we had for the groundbreaking- that's what went along with the banner. These were neighborhood-meeting announcements that we had while we

were building the school. Here's an invitation that we made for the dedication, to invite people to come. We have the ribbons for the dedication. At it, we were able to give the board of directors and everyone who took part a certificate, and we put together a packet so that the media had information- the history of the school and its future, the fact that its opening, some school facts- how much it cost to build and so on. And then technology because of course Century is such a cutting edge school for technology. And then we had a packet of photos that we also put in. And so you had basically, before landscaping, brand new, and so on.

JW: What were some of your best memories from... just regarding Century?

I remember it felt like a huge responsibility to get it to pass and we were in crisis, we were going to have to go to something horrible like a double or a triple shift in order to be able to house all the kids, and we needed this to pass. It takes three years to build a school. So the night of the election we were in a board meeting and you can't find out, you're in a board meeting, you have to find out how this is going, and I stepped outside and checked with the elections office and came back in and was able to, people said 'Well how's it going?' and I said 'I don't know, but does anyone know a new fight song?' And it was the first time we had put up this bond, because the other bond in 1992 wasn't just Century, the other one had other things in it, this was Century and we put it up and it passed, and it was, I couldn't believe it, none of us could believe it, it was amazing. I remember feeling like my baby had been taken from me because I had worked so hard on it from 1992 until 94 when it passed, and I sort of thought... (crying noise)... but it was fabulous to be able to see that come true. And look at this yucky piece of property and have it be this wonderful school. So that was very, very powerful.

JW: Okay, and what were some problems that had to be overcome on getting the bond passed and...?

BB: Well, money. Some people are going to be opposed to taxes under any circumstance. Some people say that until we go to year round school, so that we're on four tracks, so you go three tracks, three terms, but it might not be the three terms you're used to going to. You might go to summer, winter, spring... that kind of a rotation. Until we do that we aren't maximizing the use in our schools. Well, most of our schools aren't built for being able to use in the summer time, and they are simply not appropriate for putting 2000 kids into without air conditioning. You guys have it very nice right here, but there are other facilities that aren't nearly like that. And eventually you run out of that space too, and then I get down to you have one chance to be a fourth grader, and you have one chance to be a seventh grader, and you have one chance to be a junior. Should you have to go to the substandard condition? I don't believe you should. I don't believe you should have to have your math class on a stage at Poynter, because that's what they were doing, in order to be able to work. I don't believe you ought to cut the staff room in half in order to make an extra health classroom, and that's what they had to do. We had pictures, weird pictures of things happening in locations that simply weren't appropriate. And the anti-tax group had to get off their... position and support it.

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JW: Okay, and I don't think we got this on here... so the boundary issue?

BB: Oh, the boundary issue, okay. Putting the boundary together... it was a little difficult because Hilhi and Century are located so close together, and one of the main complicators was that the six Reedville elementary schools were accustomed to attending Brown, and they were the only people that attended Brown, so they saw it as their junior high. They then assumed that any high school nearby would be their high school. So that when the calculations on attendance were done it became apparent that Century could not handle all the kids who went to Brown in a four year basis, that if we did that, we would be overcrowded... even more so than you are today. So, because Butternut was the farthest removed, and because Butternut was on the other side of the highway, and because Ladd Acres is right here and very, very close, Butternut was the group that was identified as appropriate to not go to Century to high school. And so unfortunately those kids go to junior high, or to middle school with their peers from Reedville and then they as a group have to go to Hilhi. And... some parents were... made things very uncomfortable, but it was because they were feeling uncomfortable, and they acted as though Hilhi was a deficient school, which it is not, and made some complaints when in fact somebody wasn't going to be able to go to this school. The boundary was a big deal because at the same time we were moving ninth graders out of the junior highs and into all three of the high schools, Century, Glencoe and Hilhi. And so we were impacting boundaries all over the place. And then there's human nature, that when you get told your going to go the new school sometimes you're the person that says, 'but I don't want to', and when you get told you don't get to go to the new school you're the person that says, 'but I want to'. And so you have some people who are upset, tipsy-turvy, and so on. There's also always the situation when you build a new school that there's some degree of jealousy by the other schools, that say you get everything new. 'Why does Century get everything new when they move in?' Well when you write a bond, and you write it for the ballot, it says for Century you're going to build and equip this school. We didn't get to buy brand new furniture and stick it at Hilhi or Glencoe and bring Hilhi and Glencoe's furniture over here. It's not allowed according to the way that the ballot was written. And then again we don't put more money into a new school for several years and we continue to put money into older schools. Some people equate a brand new facility with the better education. For that reason the population in this area went up more than we would have anticipated and because people bought with the intention of sending their children to this school because it was new and had computers, it must be a better school.

JW: Okay, do you think that splitting them up in middle school would contribute to any sort of rivalry between Century and Hilhi?

BB: Splitting them up? You mean having Butternut not go to Brown, so that they're split up from the beginning?

JW: Yeah, or just in middle school they're together and...

BB: Oh, well in reality you get split up kind of in life, it's not unusual to have that happen. In fact the kids who had gone to Thomas were accustomed to having some of their kids go to Glencoe and some go to Hilhi, Poynter, same thing- some had gone to Glencoe and some had gone to Hilhi. Evergreen had pretty much had every body go to Glencoe, but those other schools took it, I mean, that was normal, those kids missed their friends when they went to different high schools, but it had always been done that way. Brown had never had that done and so change is a difficult animal for people and they resisted that change.

JW: Okay, what was your vision of Century?

BB: I was on the staff that opened Glencoe high school in 1980, and it was the most powerful, positive experience in my career, and I've been here 26 years. There is nothing like being part of the group that makes the school what it becomes for the rest of it's existence, you set those traditions, you build those practices that are so important. And so, one of the things that I hoped for was that Century would be able to be the same kind of experience for the first staff and for the first group of kids to go through. If it was a positive, successful experience at the beginning it was going to carry over for years and years and years, and I hoped that that was going to be the case. That's probably my strongest hope.

JW: Okay, and how much of that vision do you think has been realized?

BB: I think it's been very, very good. I think that Century has gone out on a limb on providing kids the additional class opportunities in 32 credits. I think that Century's staff is well known for fabulous learning experiences for kids, much like Mrs. Duyckinck's end of the year projects every year. I think that they've handled, Century has handled having a huge population very, very well. It's not easy to have this many kids in a school and we traditionally think that things go very, very well here. It's well respected. I'm pleased with what it has become and amazed that we are now looking at the next new school. I just can't believe we're doing that, it's happened so fast.

JW: How do you think that Century is perceived in the community and among other schools?

BB: There's a difference, I think that Century is perceived positively in the community, it's considered to be a good school, a good solid school with a strong reputation. I think that there are times when other schools perceive Century as having been favored with facilities. But like I said earlier that's normal and natural. That's all.

JW: As the communications person were there any really big issues that you had to deal with in the community?

BB: The boundary issue was a tough one. It was the first time we had built a school in 17 years. By the time we opened Glencoe, or excuse me, by the time we opened Century it was 16 years after we had opened Evergreen, and I wasn't involved in opening that at all.

But communicating with people, making sure the neighbors knew, there's going to be noise, there's going to be dirt, there's going to be lots of activity. Making sure that from the very beginning, even before kids and staff were here that Century was a good neighbor was a really important key. Making sure and reminding people that even though you live in Ladd Acres or you go to Indian Hills, Century's you're school. It's just as much a school that belongs to the grandmother in North Plains who doesn't have anybody that will ever go here, it's the community school. And I need people to remember that because the next time you want them to come to the elections and vote for you they need to feel like you're just as important all the time as you are when you're ready to give your tax dollars away.

JW: Do you think that the steps that you followed for Century will be kind of repeated, like did you kind of do the same thing with Liberty?

BB: We did very much the same thing with Liberty. We've become pretty sophisticated with making projections on enrollment. We've enjoyed growth that where some school districts in this state have had declining enrollment and they have schools that are getting emptier, and emptier, and emptier and it's very difficult. We anticipated before we built, when we were trying to pass the bond for Century one of the things that we said to people is you need to understand, we believe that when we open this in 1997 we will have only about five years before we're over capacity again and need another high school. We were very upfront with people on that. We wanted to be able to say when we came back, 'look we reminded you we were going to grow out of Century very fast', and we did. So, we brought together another task force, this time it wasn't a school crowding task force, but it was a bond task force, and we looked at, 'What do we do next?', 'What can we put in it?' we knew we were running out of space in some of our elementary schools but we knew that Century was in trouble and Glencoe would be very soon. Hilhi has been difficult for us because it hasn't gotten overcrowded. We left space in it when we designed the boundary here at Century. Because if the south urban reserves had been developed, Hilhi would be the one to get all those. So that slowed down and Hilhi still has space. So we had a little bit of a problem with, how come Hilhi needs another school in it's community when Hilhi's not full?... Century's bulging, Glencoe's bulging, we're having a problem in our elementaries. And so we got into a situation of having to decide, 'do we go with just a new high school?' or 'do we go with just an elementary school?', 'where's the crisis and what can we do?' some people said 'well you ought to put up one ballot measure for elementaries and you ought to put up another ballot measure for a high school', well you can't do that people will vote against one or the other and you won't end up with the majority on either, and so we tested it with a professional opinion poll on what was exceptable. People tend to be a little more sympathetic to elementary schools then they do to high schools. So the success of passing the Patterson, Orenco and Hilhi improvement bond was probably a lot of sympathy about the elementaries and then recognizing after Century was built that Hilhi needed improvements and renovation. Then we came back again with another task force and ended up with Liberty High School, and Imlay and Witch Hazel and improvements, so we've used the same process.

JW: Okay, and were there any conflicts, once it started that you had to deal with?

BB: Not that I had to, No.

JW: Is there anything that you would do different with Liberty High School?

BB: When Mr. Barnekoff was named the planning principal for this school, he was immediately, well, very soon relieved of his responsibilities at Hilhi and he was given an office at the district office and he was given virtually two years to plan this school. He was paid to be able to do that. The laws have changed and you can no longer pay for that out of the bond fund, so we have to pay for it out of general fund and with finances the way they are, we can't afford to do that. And so the person who is going to be the principal at Liberty High School has not had nearly the freedom of time to be able to develop the vision and the program and the identity of Liberty High School that Mr. Barnekoff did, and that's really too bad. But it's a reality.

JW: Could you give me kind of a general outline with the unification of all the Hillsboro Schools?

BB: Sure, Ballot measure five passed in the early eighties and it severely cut back our ability to get local property taxes, and instead we became funded primarily through state income tax and by a state formula that said how much money we could have. That meant that the state was going to have a problem trying to fund all these schools some of which had been funded very, very well before by their communities and some of which had been funded very, very poorly by their communities. One of the things that they said they would do, the legislature, to save money was take school districts like ours was at that time, where you have in this area, seven separate school districts and make them become one. And so we had what was called a union high district and it was like, if you think of an umbrella, the union high district covered everything that we now know as the Hillsboro School District. And within the union high district we had six separate elementary districts. Each one of them went to grade six, each one of them then sent their kids to our junior highs and high schools. But each one of them had their own superintendent, their own board, their own business manager, their own rules, their own transportation system, and on and on and on. Well, just like I told you earlier, people tend to be very sympathetic and close in relation to their elementary schools, they tend to think of middle schools as 'oh my gosh, those are weird places' and high schools as pretty much 'oh I wouldn't go there', they just don't know what goes on in high schools so they stay away. So even parents of kids who were in the fourth grade would think of the high school district as those other guys, when in fact we were their kids school district too and in two years they needed to care a whole lot how we were doing. And so the legislature passed a law in 1991... 92, that said all the districts like ours had to unify. Well, nobody wanted that to happen, we had... Hillsboro Elementary had nine elementary schools, Reedville had six, West Union had two elementary schools, Groner was one district, Farmington View was one district and North Plains was one district, they each were just one single school, so you had a superintendent/principal and the people who were on those boards didn't want to give up their authority to that union high school district, but

by law the union high district board would be what they called the surviving board, because it was the board that was elected over all. We worked for four years working agreements and compromise, and agreeing on your policy in your district is different than my policy in my district so which one are we going to use and how are we going to do it? Agreeing on should we be a district where the kids go to middle school in the sixth grade or should they go to middle school in the seventh grade. What text books should we have for math? How shall we run the bussing? What food service shall we ...? Everything it takes to run the school district had to be re-decided and agreed upon by people who didn't want it to happen. And the deadline for getting it done was July 1, 1996. So the superintendent of the Hillsboro Union High School District was Nikki Squire, and she became the superintendent over all. That meant six superintendents were no longer superintendent, you can imagine how happy those people were. Some of them retired, Hillsboro Elementary retired two years early, and the superintendent from the high school district became the superintendent for the Hillsboro Elementary district at the same time, so she did two jobs for two years, rather than replace somebody who was only going to be there for two years. Then the guy at West Union left and they hired someone just on an interim, the guy at North Plains retired when we unified, the guy from Groner came to work at the district office, Farmington came to work at the district office, and Reedville came to work at the district office. But in jobs that were not superintendent, and that's very difficult. Teachers and staff in those individual schools knew those superintendents really well and now suddenly that's not their superintendent. On a good side, some of the school districts were having a difficult time with finances and were at a point where they were going to start to lose some of the programs that they were accustomed to having. We were large enough that we were going to be able to help save some of their programs, some of them don't recognize that, but that's the case. Some teachers like at North Plains, where there are only two third grade teachers didn't have the ability to go to staff trainings and talk to other third grade teachers and learn how to do things and share ideas, or move to another school if they wanted to do that. Now they're part of the larger school district and they could interact and they could move to other schools and get a change and have more mobility in their career and that was very positive. The kids, when they came to Brown, when they came to Century were coming from a system now that was unified, where so that you don't have kids who come at Glencoe High School and say, 'oh I did this check writing project in the fifth grade', 'Well I never did it at my school.' Because they used to sometimes have different curriculum. So, it's been positive, most people forget that it even happened. There are statistics that indicate that 55% of the people who live here now, didn't live here in 1996, so we're the way it's always been. And even the people who lived here then, but didn't have kids in school never knew that we were such and oddball, because nobody else has that kind of a school district. Overnight we became the 5th largest school district in the state.

JW: And, did the formation of the... unification have anything to do with helping Century get going?

BB: You know, Century was passed in 1994, before the unification occurred, but while it was in progress, while it was being worked on. It may have made communication a little

easier, it may have meant that the superintendents of the other school districts were a little more likely to help us, because they knew that it was going to be one district.

JW: And was there anything else you would like to add?

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BB: Who are the key people involved in Century and making it happen, that's one of the questions on here, and I know that's probably for somebody else. But one of the things that you'll here from Nikki Squire, she was the superintendent was that she wanted the design of this school to be a school that really said something important to you when you walked in, whether you were a community member, a parent, a student or a staff member, when you walked in the door you wanted to have a feeling that something really important happened here. She wanted to have a visible entrance, something that said, 'Come here, this is the way in', and when you enter it needed to be powerful, and that was how some of the things were designed. Another thing that had happened is that when we passed this bond in 1994 it was the same year that Westview High School had opened. And Mr. Barnekoff and the principal at Westview, Mr. Case are very, very good friends, Mr. Case used to work with us at Glencoe. We were able to take advantage of some of the things that they learned through the construction through Westview High School to make Century a better school. Some of the design features about Westview were improved in making Century and we were very fortunate to be able to do that.