

The History of Sheridan High School

21st Century Program



Written by Roger B. Rowland
Published by the Sheridan Historical Society, Inc.

Sheridan, Colorado

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This history was published on October 1, 2021 by the:



Sheridan Historical Society, Inc.

c/o City of Sheridan, Colorado
4101 S. Federal Blvd.
Sheridan, Colorado 80110-5399

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About the Author



Roger B. Rowland was a founding member of the Sheridan Historical Society. He took a break from the Society for a few years. In 2000, he returned as an active member of the Society. He currently serves as the Secretary/Treasurer of the Society.

In 2001 he undertook his first research project for the Society by creating the historic listing of city officials. It was a difficult task because of the lost and damaged city records from the 1965 Platte River Flood. Each name had to be researched from individual City Council minutes covering a period of almost forty years.

This history represents his eighth major project for the Society and represents several months of research and writing. He grew up in Sheridan and attended Sheridan schools. He graduated from Sheridan High School in 1973. He has served on the City Planning Commission and as Mayor from August, 1983 through December, 1989.

Dedication

*This history is dedicated to **Marsha Caldwell** for her idea and the work she did to bring the 21st Century Program into reality. Which ultimately benefited more than 1,500 Sheridan students.*

Special Note: Marsha worked as a Counselor at Sheridan High School for twenty-five years. A period longer than any other counselor in the history of Sheridan High School.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the following people.

Pat Sandos

Superintendent, Sheridan School District No. 2
For assistance in providing access to district records for the 21st Century Program.

Polly Plancarte

Secretary to the Superintendent and Board of Education
For assistance in pulling 21st Century Program files from district records.

Marsha Caldwell

Counselor, Sheridan High School, Retired
For answers and the commentary provided in response to questions from the author.

Michael Clough

Former Superintendent, Sheridan School District No. 2
For answers and the explanations provided in response to questions from the author.

History of the Sheridan High School 21st Century Program

The Idea

The idea for this program came from Marsha Caldwell a Counselor at Sheridan High School and in conjunction with Principal Ken Bostdorff and District Superintendent Dr. Ken Reiter. This group gained the support of the Board of Education. Mrs. Caldwell provided the following explanation on how the program came about.

“The idea came as a result of conversations about how we could help Sheridan students realize their goals of seeking a college education. Few students went on to college from Sheridan and I felt strongly that having more education was the key to helping students be more successful in the work world. Students that did go on to college often dropped out because many of their parents were unfamiliar about college and therefore were unable to help their child through the adjustment.



The idea did not come out of getting more money for Sheridan but rather to provide a type of safety net to help the students acclimate to college. If the students were still enrolled in Sheridan, we could provide that safety net. I advocated to spend one day at ACC each week to be available to students enrolled in the 21st Century students.

The students also knew they could come to the high school to see me or phone if they were on a tight schedule since many of them worked in addition to going to college. I also had access to reports from the professors of the courses the students enrolled in and might not be doing well and I made a point of following up with those students.

I often told people I had the best job ever. Some of the students became very emotional about the program and how the program had changed their lives. They thought I was one who did all this but I told them it was the Sheridan Board of Education who agreed to take the step to agree to support the program.

On another note, the Advanced Sheridan Diploma was set up in an effort to help the students chose a path that would help them have a skill or help them reach the requirements to get into college. I felt students were not always doing a good job of choosing courses that would help them after graduation so pursuing a specific path helped. The students embraced the higher diplomas and were proud of their accomplishments...much like winning an award. I was proud of them too because I felt they challenged themselves to secure a path that would probably provide greater success in the work world.

Truly, the idea of the program came about from discussions I had with Ken Reiter. Neither one of my parents graduated from high school. Yet four of five of

us earned college degrees because they wanted us to have a better life. We got scholarships and financial aid and always, always had the encouragement of our parents. My dad worked on the assembly line at Caterpillar Tractor Co and my mom was a school cook...but they had a dream for their kids.

I wanted that same dream for the students at Sheridan and I knew the parents wanted that for their children. It all came together when the PSEO Act came into being. It was like a gift to make those dreams we had for “our kids at Sheridan”. come alive.

Perhaps, you are thinking that is a bit dramatic but because of my upbringing I just had that as a part of a dream and that dream became a reality. If programs like the 21st Century were allowed, the state of Colorado and any other state would be able to realize more in tax dollars from the jobs students would get that were probably better than the jobs they could get without further education.

I was sad to hear the program was discontinued because I still believe it is the key. Students from low income areas have those dreams but the key that helped the SHS students was the safety net, the support that they got from still being in high school. They were not alone. They had their teachers, counselors, and the support of the community. SHS was better for having had the 21st Century program.”

Creating the Program

The program is based on definitions in the Colorado Constitution and state statutes. The original framing of the Constitution provides “...that public education shall be available to all students between the ages of six and twenty-one years.” The Public School Finance Act of 1994 (PSFA) provides “...total program funding is available to ‘fund the costs of providing public education’ and that the ‘amounts and purposes for which moneys are budgeted and expended shall be in the discretion of the district.’”

The program was developed under the provisions of the PSEO Act. PSEO stands for Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act. The act provides that high school students enrolled in the 11th or 12th grade and are under the age of 21 can apply college credits toward high school graduation as well as a posted secondary degree or certification. Another statute states that students in a PSEO “shall be included in the pupil enrollment” for purposes of PSFA funding. “The statute does not authorize a fifth-year option where students are allowed to delay graduation.” The district in essence came up with a new graduation diploma “21st Century” to skirt this provision.

The school board enacted policies that provided for four “Differentiated Diplomas.” There was a traditional diploma already in place. A “Sheridan Diploma” and “Advanced Diploma” were put in place along with a “21st Century Diploma.” The advanced diploma required the completion of 260 credits compared to the traditional 240 credits. The 21st Century Diploma required the completion of 320 credits.

At the end of their fourth (senior) year students participating in the 21st Century Program received a “Certificate of Continuation toward the 21st Century Diploma.” Once they successfully completed the 320 credits the students received their “21st Century Diploma.” Students had options to earn certificates from a vocational school or community college. It also allowed students to receive an Associate Degree. Any student that failed to complete the program were given the traditional high school diploma.

Differentiated Diplomas

<u>Standard</u>	<u>Sheridan Career and Technical Education Emphasis</u>	<u>Advanced Sheridan College Bound; meets CCHE requirements</u>	<u>21st Century Minimum one year of college or ACTS (career) coursework</u>
40 English	40 English	40 English	40 English
30 Social Studies	30 Social Studies	30 Social Studies	30 Social Studies
<i>For all diplomas, the study of government as part of social studies is a state-mandated requirement.</i>			
<i>For all diplomas, 15 hours of service learning are required during junior or senior year.</i>			
30 Math (including Core Plus I,II,III or equivalent)	30 Math (including Core Plus I,II,III or equivalent)	40 Math (including Core Plus I,II,III or equivalent)	30 Math (including Core Plus I,II,III or equivalent)
30 Science (20 lab based)	30 Science (20 lab based)	30 Science (20 lab based) 20 Foreign Language	30 Science (20 lab based)
5 Health	5 Health	5 Health	5 Health
10 P.E.	10 P.E.	10 P.E.	10 P.E.
<i>For all diplomas, successful completion of Marching Band may count towards Physical Education credits.</i>			
10 Fine Arts	10 Fine Arts	10 Fine Arts	10 Fine Arts
10 Practical Arts	10 Practical Arts	10 Practical Arts	10 Practical Arts
Total: 165 Core Credits	Total: 165 Core Credits	Total: 195 Core Credits	Total: 165 Core Credits
55 Electives	75 Electives	65 Electives *	55 Electives
Total: 220 Credits	Total: 240 Credits	Total: 260 Credits	Total: 220 Credits
		*Class of 2009 needs 30 credits of math to earn Advanced Diploma	100 Additional Electives
	Sheridan Passport or two years of a Career and Tech Ed Program	*Electives should include 20 hours of fine arts, world language, information processing, computer technology, and additional academic classes.	Total: 320 Credits
*Does not meet Colorado Council on Higher Education Standards for college admission.	*Does not meet Colorado Council on Higher Education Standards for college admission.	*20 credits of Foreign language are strongly encouraged for class of 2009, but not required.	

Participation requirements for the program were quite rigorous. Students and their parents had to agree the student needed coursework at a higher academic level than was available at the high school. The high school principal in consultation with teachers and guidance counselors had to confirm that each student in the program had the ability, desire, responsibility, and maturity to complete the program.

The program was designed to pay college tuition for students that had a financial hardship and were eligible for reduced-cost lunches. Students were required to maintain passing grades. Students that did not get a passing grade in a class were responsible for reimbursing the district for the cost of the class. The program allowed students to attend Arapahoe Community College or the Arapahoe-Douglas Area Vocational School. Over ninety percent of Sheridan's students fell into the hardship definition.

The school district entered into a cooperative agreement with Arapahoe Community College to enroll in a PSEO program. The college was reimbursed by the school district for the tuition costs. Students were responsible for the cost of books, fees, and other supplies. This agreement was renewed on an annual basis. The agreement included provisions the college had space availability to accommodate the students. The college enrollment could be discontinued if the student did not have the skills to complete courses. The college was responsible for all course content and quality of instruction. The school district merely handled the administration component of the program. A counselor was also provided by the high school in support of students in the program. The counselor would spend one day each week at ACC.

During the 1999 – 2000 school year there were 97 students participating in the program. During that year the district spent \$75,548.00 on the program.

“Who’s on First?”

In 2005 the Colorado Department of Education disagreed with the school district on the legality of the program. The Department of Education contended the program was a prohibited fifth year program. There was the possibility the program would be suspended pending resolution of the dispute. The suspension never happened and the program continued uninterrupted.

A “Community College Week” article from July 4, 2005 illustrates the confusion with the PSEO and “fifth year” programs. “Two Colorado high schools are sending students through community college tuition-free. The high schools pay their college tuition while continuing to get state funding based on their enrollment. But the Colorado Board of Education questions whether the practice is legal and has requested a ruling by the state attorney general.”

The article later stated that “Dr. Nancy J. McCallin, president of the Colorado Community College System, pointed out the state’s community colleges have been enrolling thousands of high school students every year” under the PSEO Act. “These two school districts say, ‘Well, we haven’t graduated the students.’” The district always maintained students that chose to participate in the program had not graduated until they completed the program.

The opposite side is described by Jane Urschel a lobbyist for Colorado school boards. “Technically the PSEO law implies community-college course should be for [after] graduation, and once the graduation requirements are met, then that’s the end of the state reimbursing the student for postsecondary courses.”

The Rocky Mountain News reported on September 16, 2005 the State Board of Education “punted a decision on high school programs that pay for college, saying state lawmakers should clarify the issue, not the education board.” The paper described the actions as a “Who’s on First?” comedy routine leaving both the Denver and other school districts uncertain as to how to proceed. The CDE had learned of the Lincoln High School’s “College Now” earlier in 2005 while they were aware Sheridan’s program for years.

The First Lawsuit

In 2006 the State Board of Education on a split vote stated these programs should not continue. A lawsuit was filed by the school district against the state. A settlement was offered by the state which would have grandfathered and reinstated Sheridan’s program but would have prohibited the program for other districts. The Sheridan School Board declined the settlement and continued to move forward with the program.

The state legislature adopted the “Fast College Fast Jobs” act which was signed by the Governor in April of 2007. The act provided strict requirements for districts to implement “Fifth Year” programs. The bill was designed to limit the fiscal impact on the state by limiting eligibility. The theory was because the program had been suspended, it would not be until 2012 before state funding would be impacted.

“On May 10, 2007, the State Board of Education unanimously voted to repeal Regulation 5.18 in its entirety, removing the prohibition of funding for fifth year programs under the PSEO.” Their action was reaffirmed on August 8, 2007, after holding hearings on the issue.

The Joint Budget Committee of the Colorado Legislature grandfathered in the existing programs and stated there was not a statutory prohibition of the programs. In essence the attorney said “...the programs are authorized under a school districts ability through local control to set its own graduation requirements/diploma actions.” The only requirement was the “District must have specific language in a policy for the program to be allowed.”

The Audit Trigger

The program once again came under intense scrutiny in 2013. In October of that year the Department of Education initiated a field audit of the district’s pupil count going back to the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year. Pupil count audits are a regular event but this one came at an awkward time for the district.

The district voluntarily provided information regarding the 21st Century Diploma Program. Also provided were high school attendance records, schedules, student transcripts, ICAPs (Individual Career and Academic Plans), student handbooks, payment verifications for all 21st Century class schedules, and all agreements with Arapahoe Community College for all years from 2009 to 2013.

In January of 2014 there was a meeting between the Superintendent and the Commissioner of the Department of Education. They discussed the possibility of appealing the district accreditation,

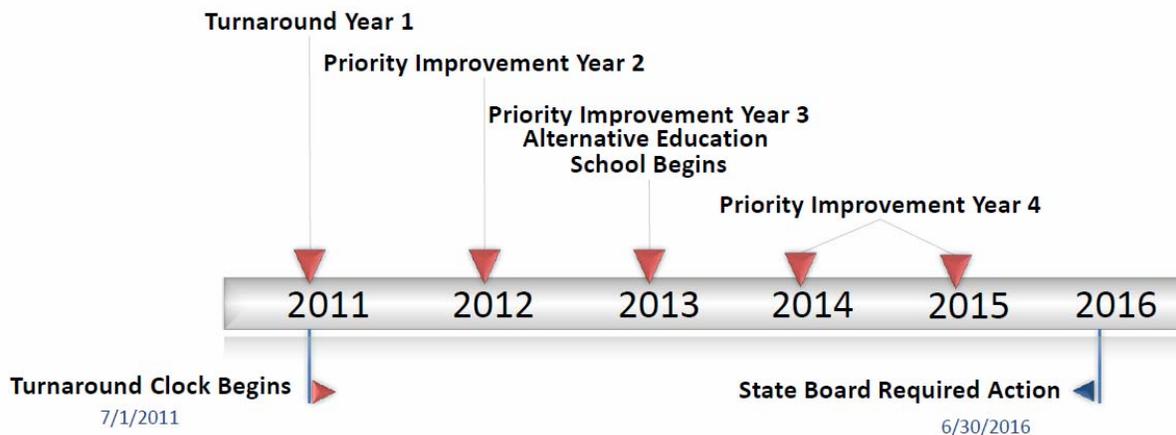
as it related to the enrollment counts of students in the 21st Century program. The state contended they were graduates and should not be included. The Commissioner responded that Sheridan could be “opening a can of worms.” In another instance the Commissioner said the CDE’s enforcement of the post-secondary options was a “mess.”

In February the state provided an enrollment count that was disputed by the school district. The count did not include students in the 21st Century program. The resulting impact was to reduce funding by 8%. The district complained the Commissioner’s decision created two categories of graduate, one for accreditation purposes and the other for revenue purposes. In essence “The effect of the Commissioner’s decision is to label Sheridan’s students in the 21st Century Diploma program as neither funded students nor graduates.”

On March 10, 2015 the district filed a lawsuit in the Denver District County against the Commissioner and the Colorado Department of Education. The lawsuit contended the Commissioner’s decision was an abuse of discretion and contrary to findings by the State Board of Education. The laws of the state provided the organization of school districts was the responsibility of locally elected boards of education and those boards controlled the course of instruction within their districts.

In an April letter to the community Superintendent Michael Clough wrote the following. “The decision to file a lawsuit against the Colorado Department of Education in early March was not taken lightly. But it was the right thing to do. Taking the dispute to court was a necessary step in the effort to protect a key district program. For years, starting with the vision of former superintendent Ken Reiter, Sheridan School District 2 has maintained a bridge to higher education through the state’s concurrent enrollment program.”

The audit had been intertwined with the State Accountability Clock ratings. In 2009 the Colorado legislature passed the “Educational Accountability Act. In October 2009 Sheridan was given a “Turnaround” rating and “Priority Improvement” rating in October 2010. Sheridan appealed the “Priority Improvement” rating which was heard by the State Board of Education on March 11, 2014. It was 2016 before the high school was finally moved from “Improvement” to “Performance” and off the accountability clock.





Also, in Clough's letter "And then along comes politics. Yes, politics. As you recall, last year we spent considerable effort appealing the state's decision about where we ranked on the accreditation scale. What you might not know is that, behind the scenes, our pupil count audit was suddenly placed on hold while the accreditation appeal played itself out. What had long been a routine process (counting students and occasionally being audited) turned into a hot potato. Why? Because in order to keep Sheridan's accreditation rating downgraded, in a category where we didn't belong, the state had to suddenly re-define our hard-working 21st Century Program students and count them the same way the system counts

dropouts."

Losing the Battle

Unlike 2007 the State Board held their ground. Throughout the appeal period, it was apparent that many of the State Board members were sympathetic to the case made by the district. It also seemed as if the members were aware of the opportunities made available to hundreds of Sheridan students because of the 21st Century Program. But at the end of the hearing, on a split vote, Sheridan's appeal to raise their accreditation status from "Priority Improvement" to "Improvement" fell short. The district could have simply manipulated their accreditation status by paying back the per pupil revenue on four of the over fifty students enrolled in the 21st Century Program. When asked, Clough said, "To make those changes would have been dishonest and unfair to the four students that would have been selected."

Clough believes that CDE underestimated the integrity and tenacity of the school district and that school district underestimated CDE's "propensity for retaliation." With the ruling Clough and the district recognized that the 21st Century Program was essentially on life support. The Sheridan Board of Education and administration had "failed to realize the lengths CDE would go to make their point in ending the 21st Century Program." Clough was soon to realize that CDE was about to circle back and connect the pupil count audit with the accreditation appeal.

Although the pupil count auditor had completed and shared with the district the final draft of the audit, Clough and the Sheridan School Board were notified that the 21st Century students were not eligible to be counted as graduates for the purpose of accreditation. At the same time these students would be counted as graduates and therefore ineligible for funding. This meant the Sheridan District would be required to repay the per pupil operating revenue for every student in the 21st Century program over the last four years.

The decision of the State Board and the CDE left the Sheridan Board and administration shaking their heads. To put an "exclamation point" on the State's decision, the district was presented with a bill for \$1,288,023.00 and remained on Priority Improvement due to a "low graduation" rate. The district decided to fight back.

The Settlement

“Whereas, the Parties wish to avoid the expense and vagaries of continuing litigation, and the Parties are willing to settle their dispute on the terms set forth in this Agreement.”

The Colorado Department of Education agrees to revise its findings and close the audit for the years 2009 through 2014 and show funding owed will be \$381,201.01. Sheridan will have up through November 12, 2021 to repay these funds without interest. There would be no audit for the school years of 2014 through 2016 under the PFSA. Sheridan will file a voluntary dismissal of the lawsuit. Sheridan releases all claims against the CDE and that it will not sue in the future based on the allegations in the lawsuit. The CDE releases Sheridan on claims arising from the audit and not take any further action against the school district. Both parties acknowledge the settlement is subject to the provisions of the open records act and subject to public disclosure.

The settlement was agreed to by the Colorado Department of Education on December 22, 2015 and by the school district on December 31, 2015. The \$381,201.01 settlement was a far cry from the amount the state alleged was owed from audit for the of 2009 – 2014 of \$1,288,023.00.

Summary

It is hard to even begin to estimate the hundreds of Sheridan students that benefited from the 21st Century program. The “in school” pupil count information and the students in the 21st Century program were blended within the district records. From the time the program started in 1994 it continued to gain steam to 2015 as the participants grew at a steady pace. Clough estimates that well over 1500 students benefited from the program and many of these students would not have had a chance at going to college had it not been for the 21st Century Program. In the words of Superintendent Clough, “The unfairness of the \$381,201 was hard but having to shutter that program after 22 years [part of the settlement] was even a bigger pill to swallow.”

Oh, The Irony of It

With one last twist of irony, there are now three bills and the “Americas Families Plan” pending before the US Congress that would pay tuition in part or full for Community Colleges across the country.

“America’s College Promise Act” introduced by: Sens. Patty Murray (D-WA) and Tammi Baldwin (D-WI), and Reps. Bobby Scott (D-VA) and Andy Levin (D-MI). This bill guarantees universal, first-dollar free tuition and fees at public community colleges in states that opt in.

“College for All Act” introduced by: Sen Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA). This bill would double Pell Grant and would also guarantee universal, first-dollar free tuition and fees at public community colleges in states that opt in.

“Debt-Free College Act” introduced by: Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) and Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI). In this bill students would be asked to pay their Expected Family Contribution, and federal (including Pell) and state grants would be used to cover the remaining balance without loans.

The “America Families Plan” as proposed by President Joe Biden. This plan would guarantee universal, first-dollar free tuition and fees at public community colleges in states that opt in.

Bibliography

Several articles were reviewed from the *Denver Post*, *Englewood Herald*, *Denver Herald Dispatch*, *Littleton Independent*, and *Rocky Mountain News* from 1999 through 2016. From clippings, originally obtained by Aileen Marple, subsequently given to the Sheridan Historical Society.

Several files were reviewed from the District Administration Offices of the Sheridan School District No. 2 from 1994 through 2016.

Articles from *Chalk Beat*, a nonprofit news organization covering “the effort to improve schools for all children...” www.chalkbeat.org, from 2015.

Article from *Sheridan News*, City of Sheridan Newsletter, Vol. 4, No. 44, April, 2015. The original author was Mark Stevens.

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4101 S. Federal Blvd.
Sheridan, Colorado 80110-4316

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