

# Referendum would address accessibility

*Central senior hits hurdles trying to navigate hallways and classrooms with walker*

By Pamela Lannom  
plannom@thehinsdalean.com

Morgan Chisholm begins her day like many seniors at Hinsdale Central.

She drives to school, parks her car and heads inside to meet with one of her teachers or talk to her friends.

But she has a stop to make first, in Room 163. She's not there to talk to orchestra teacher Serge Penssik. She's there to drop off her canes and pick up her walker.

"I love Mr. Penssik," she said. "He's been really generous with his room space and letting me use it for whatever. Other students that have disabilities have put their equipment there in the past for easy access coming in and out of the school."

Beyond that, "easy access" has not been the Central experience for Chisholm, who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at birth.

Her very first class requires her to make a trip to the basement.

"The only way I can get down there is by using the elevators on that side of the south," she said, pointing to the southeast corner of the school.

Chisholm still has more maneuvering to do once she gets to class.

"I enjoy the print design class, but I would like a bit more space to just kind of have more room for my walker," she said.

Then it's back upstairs for an AP lit class, her longest trip of the day.

"I'm never on time for that class," she said.

The elevator on the northwest side of school would be convenient if only it descended to the basement, which has a smaller footprint than the first floor.

"That's part of why it takes me so long to get from Point A to Point B is I only have that one option," Chisholm said.

Then it's downstairs again for her study hall in the basement and back upstairs for math, which meets in a classroom that's

uncomfortably small for Chisholm.

"I sit at the corner desk farthest from the door because that is the only place where there is space for my walker," she said. "People still trip over it every day."

From math she heads to Spanish. Crowded hallways make that short trip more of a trek.

"It's the most congested walk of my day, but it's not one where I'm pressured for time," she said.

She travels a rather indirect route to get from Spanish to lunch so she can enter without having to go through the main cafeteria doors, which are difficult to navigate. Inside the cafeteria, it's no picnic.

"I definitely think that lunch, besides seeing my friends and talking and hanging out, it's one of the worst periods of the day. I can never actually really find a place for my walker. I don't like the bench seating because I can't swing my legs over to sit in the middle of the bench."

Her friends are used to the walker and cool about it, she said, but she still feels self-conscious.

"I hate it when I feel like people have to maneuver around me. I don't want that. I want to make myself as small as possible to fit in," she said.

After lunch is one of her favorite classes, AP macroeconomics. Unlike math, which has 27 students, this class has only 14, and the room is significantly larger.

"Nobody ever trips over me in that class," she said.

Her final class of the day is physical education in the basement fitness center. She takes the stairs, with a friend carrying her walker. If she took the elevator, a teacher would have to accompany her.

"The only way the fitness center connects with the basement (elevator) is through this really creepy hidden passageway that only the janitors use," she said. "It smells really weird and it's not a good



place to be."

The campus presents other challenges as well. Last year when she went to watch older sister Kelsie play lacrosse, she rarely sat in the bleachers at Dickinson Field.

"I can't even tell you how many times I've fallen on the bleachers," she said, noting that her canes often slip on the metal.

Chisholm is a proponent of the \$166 million referendum Hinsdale High School District 86 will have on the Tuesday, Nov. 6, ballot. Included is \$2.7 million to improve accessibility at Central (and the same amount for South), and the end result of several other projects would be a friendlier environment for those with disabilities (see sidebar).

Of course, she will not be among the beneficiaries of the enhancements.

"I won't get to use them, but everyone coming after me will and everyone, I feel, deserves that opportunity to have the same experiences at Hinsdale Central to lead them to success."

Chisholm, who hopes to attend Duke or Vanderbilt next year, feels fortunate that her type of cerebral palsy doesn't affect her cognitive abilities. She can adapt to her circumstances while advocating for change. She recognizes not all students with disabilities are similarly equipped.

"We kind of need to be proactive and realize yes, Hinsdale Central is one of the best schools in the state and in the nation, but it doesn't quite achieve excellence in all things because it hasn't accounted for all the lacking aspects of accessibility in the school," she said. "It should be equal for all students and as of right now, we're doing the best we can, but it can be better."

## Accessibility projects

The \$166 million referendum includes \$5.4 million earmarked specifically for improving accessibility at the two high schools.

**Central** — \$2.5 million to provide ADA accessibility throughout the facility and to the athletic fields, and \$190,800 to address existing walkways and entrances that are not ADA compliant. Project includes an oversized elevator connecting to the fitness center and green room on the basement level and the auditorium balcony on the second floor

**South** — \$2.5 million to provide ADA accessibility throughout the facility and to the athletic fields, and \$175,440 to address existing walkways and entrances that are not ADA compliant

The following proposed Hinsdale Central projects have components related to accessibility:

- \$24 million to expand and renovate the pool includes a new accessible entry, accessible locker rooms and accessible spectator seating
- \$15.3 million to renovate student services and special ed will make the guidance counselors' offices accessible and create an extra hallway to alleviate congestion in other areas of the school
- \$4.5 million to renovate the cafeteria will create space enabling users of walkers or wheelchairs to access all cafeteria lines
- \$3 million to renovate the auditorium will include accessible seating
- \$1.3 million to replace the home grandstands at Dickinson Field will include accessible seating
- \$726,600 to replace 93 exterior and interior doors to meet current life-safety code will include handicapped access push buttons

**Using a walker** to get around Hinsdale Central is no easy task for senior Morgan Chisholm, who said people regularly trip over her walker. "There's nothing I can do to stop that, but it's a subconscious stressor to try to stay out of people's way," she said. (Jim Slonoff photo)



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