

Salem Attendance Center / Tornado Restoration Project

Community Update

Since the devastating tornado of March 15, 2025, our highest priority has been restoring the Salem Attendance Center campus in a manner that is safe, responsible, and worthy of the students, staff, and community we serve. As we prepare to welcome students back on August 4, 2026, we want to provide our families and community with a factual update on the project, explain why certain aspects of the work have changed over time, and reaffirm our commitment to completing this project the right way.

Recently, many questions have been asked about the progress of construction, changes in the scope of work, environmental testing, and what parents should expect as school begins. We appreciate those questions. We believe the community should receive clear, transparent information, and we hope this update provides a better understanding of where the project stands today.

Procuring the Project

One of the questions we have received is why the District could not simply hire a contractor and begin rebuilding immediately.

Unlike private construction projects, Mississippi public school districts must follow state purchasing laws when using local, state, federal (FEMA), and insurance funds to repair public facilities. Those laws are designed to ensure transparency, fairness, and responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

Immediately following the tornado, the District engaged Allred Architectural Group, the architectural firm already under contract with the district who, in recent years, oversaw restroom renovations across the campus, restroom building construction next to the 4-6 building, the new pavilion at the back of the high school building, and baseball field lighting. Allred evaluated the damage, prepared construction documents, and developed the scope of work necessary for repairs.

Once that work was completed, the district publicly advertised the project through the Central Bidding system so qualified contractors from across the region had the opportunity to compete for the project. Sealed bids were received, evaluated for responsiveness and qualifications, and presented to the School Board.

Following that review, the Walthall County School Board awarded the construction contract to Codaray Construction, the lowest responsive and responsible bidder as required by Mississippi law.

This process ensured that the school district conducted every step of the project—from design through contractor selection—openly, competitively, and in accordance with the laws that govern Mississippi public school districts.

As Construction Progressed, Additional Structural Issues Were Discovered

As with many major renovation projects involving older buildings, some conditions could not be fully identified until demolition and construction activities were underway. Once walls, ceilings, roofing systems, and other structural components were opened for repair, previously concealed conditions were discovered that required further evaluation by the project architect, insurance adjusters, and consulting engineers.

One of the most significant discoveries involved the Salem Old Gym. As work progressed, engineers determined that the structure had additional structural deficiencies that were not apparent during the initial post-tornado damage assessment. These findings prompted the District to pause portions of the planned work while engineers evaluated the building and developed recommendations.

After careful review of the engineering findings, the School Board determined that investing additional funds into repairing the aging structure was not in the District's long-term best interest. At its July 23, 2026 meeting, the Board approved a change order removing the previously approved repair work for the Old Gym and approved demolition of the structure instead.

That decision also allowed the project to be improved in another important way. Rather than reconstructing sidewalks and covered walkways leading to a building that would no longer be used, the project scope was revised to construct new sidewalks and covered walkways extending to the New Gym. This will provide students and staff with a safer, more practical pedestrian route that did not previously exist.

Additional structural issues were also identified within portions of the high school roof system. During construction, the architect and consulting structural engineer determined that portions of the existing roof framing, constructed many years prior to the tornado, did not meet current structural expectations for a public school building.

The District requested that the insurance adjusters reevaluate these newly discovered conditions. Representatives of the District, the architect, consulting engineers, and the insurance company met to review the findings. Following its evaluation, the insurance carrier determined that the additional structural work involved pre-existing construction conditions and was therefore outside the scope of covered storm damage.

Although portions of this additional work are not expected to be covered by insurance, the District has chosen to proceed with the necessary structural improvements. Our responsibility is not simply to restore buildings to their pre-storm condition. Our responsibility is to provide students and staff with facilities that are structurally sound, can be certified by qualified design professionals, and will safely serve our community for many years to come.

Recently, as of the week of July 13th, similar challenges have also emerged with the Salem Auditorium. As work progressed, deterioration was discovered within the original flat roof system beneath the existing pitched roof that had been constructed many years ago. The architect, with consultation from others, determined that this deterioration is not related to the March 2025 tornado, but rather the result of long-term deterioration that occurred over time. The condition presents a significant obstacle to constructing a new pitched roof over an existing roof system that no longer provides adequate structural support. The District is currently awaiting cost estimates comparing the extensive structural repairs necessary to reconstruct the existing building with the cost of demolition

and replacement. As with the Old Gym, our objective is to make decisions that best serve the long-term interests of our students and taxpayers. Rather than investing substantial resources into aging structures with significant pre-existing deficiencies, the District is carefully evaluating opportunities to utilize available insurance proceeds, together with local funds, to construct modern, structurally sound facilities that will safely serve Salem students for generations to come.

The football field lighting project also evolved as construction progressed. The original construction contract included replacement of the two light poles and lighting assemblies on the end of the football field that were damaged by the tornado. The light poles on the opposite end of the field sustained little to no damage and were not originally included in the replacement project. The district, based on the insurance adjuster's assessments, determined that, if anything, it would replace the lighting assembly as the poles were undamaged.

As the project advanced, the District determined that replacing the remaining lighting at the same time would provide a more consistent and cost-effective long-term solution. The District also requested that the football field utilize the same Musco lighting system recently installed at the Salem baseball field so both athletic facilities would share the same lighting technology, controls, and maintenance requirements.

During the lighting submittal process, it was determined that the originally proposed lighting fixtures did not satisfy the Buy American requirements applicable to FEMA-funded projects. As a result, additional coordination was necessary to identify a compliant lighting system that also met the District's desire for consistency across its athletic facilities.

At approximately the same time, construction activities were paused while engineers, the District, and the insurance carrier evaluated significant structural issues involving the Old Gym, Auditorium, and High School. Those project-wide evaluations delayed several aspects of construction, including final approval of the football field lighting package.

As lighting planning continued, it became evident that the two remaining undamaged poles would be incompatible with the new lighting system. Therefore, to further reduce future mobilization, shipping, and installation costs,

the District elected to order all four Musco lighting systems, and poles, together as one project- with the district assuming full costs for the two not damaged by the storm. Now that the necessary change orders have been approved, the lighting package is being released for manufacture. Although these decisions required additional time, they will provide Salem with a modern, uniform lighting system that better serves students, athletes, and the community for years to come.

Preparing for the Return of Students

While construction will continue on portions of the Salem campus beyond the first day of school and into the 2026-27 school term, our focus throughout this project has remained constant: ensuring that students and staff return to a safe learning environment.

Because questions have been raised regarding environmental conditions within the school, the District commissioned professional microbial testing of multiple areas across the Salem campus in June 2026. Sampling was conducted in the Old Gym, the Main Building, the High School, the Middle/Junior High classrooms, and the Elementary classrooms.

The testing identified one area with elevated airborne mold levels inside the Old Gym. That structure is not being utilized by students or staff and has been removed from the District's long-term plans. The School Board has approved its demolition as part of the revised construction project.

The testing also identified several localized areas where evidence of mold was found on water-damaged ceiling tiles and HVAC vents. Those conditions have been mitigated through removal of the affected ceiling tiles and cleaning of the impacted air vents.

The District also reviewed its AHERA inspection records regarding asbestos. Review of the AHERA Reinspection Report supports that no asbestos-containing materials are identified as applicable to the restoration project.

As construction continues, active work areas will remain separated from students and staff. Temporary barriers, restricted access areas, and traffic control

measures will continue to be utilized where necessary while construction activities are underway. Areas that are not yet ready for normal use will remain inaccessible until work has been completed and determined to be safe for occupancy.

Some improvements, including portions of the new sidewalks and covered walkways, will continue after the beginning of the school year. These improvements were intentionally resequenced following the decision to demolish the Old Gym. Rather than rebuilding walkways to a structure that would no longer serve students, the District chose to pause that project, wait until a decision was made about demolition, then proceed with a revised project to provide new sidewalks and covered walkways extending to the New Gym, creating a safer and more functional pedestrian route for future generations.

Throughout this project, decisions regarding construction sequencing, occupancy, and safety have been made in consultation with the project architect, engineers, contractor, and District and School administration. Student and staff safety has remained—and will continue to remain—the guiding consideration in every decision.

As of the July 3, 2026 pay application, nearly half of the overall construction contract has been completed. While some of the most visible improvements, including portions of the covered walkways and site work, remain underway, a substantial amount of structural, roofing, mechanical, electrical, and interior restoration work has already been completed across the Salem campus. Much of this work is not immediately visible to visitors, but it represents significant progress toward restoring the campus and providing safe, functional facilities for our students and staff.

Looking Ahead

Nearly a year and a half has passed since the tornado changed the Salem campus. During that time, our students, employees, and families have demonstrated remarkable resilience, patience, and understanding as this project has evolved.

While every construction project encounters challenges, this project has required decisions that extended well beyond simply repairing storm damage. As hidden

structural conditions were discovered, the District had opportunities to either restore buildings only to the extent covered by insurance or invest in improvements that would better serve students and staff for decades to come. Time after time, we have chosen the latter.

Those decisions have not always been the easiest or the least expensive, but they have been guided by a simple principle: when we rebuild, we should rebuild the right way.

As students return on August 4, they will return to a campus that continues to improve each day. Some construction activities will remain underway, and additional improvements will continue throughout the coming months. We recognize that this requires continued patience, and we sincerely appreciate the understanding and support our families and community have shown throughout this process.

The Walthall County School District remains committed to maintaining open communication as work progresses. We will continue working closely with our architect, engineers, contractor, insurance representatives, and regulatory agencies to ensure this project is completed safely, responsibly, and in a manner that reflects the high expectations our community has for its schools.

Salem Attendance Center has long been an important part of Walthall County. When this project is complete, our students and staff will benefit from facilities that are not only restored from the effects of the tornado, but strengthened through thoughtful planning, sound engineering, and a commitment to doing what is best for children.

To our Salem students, parents, employees, and community members – the Board of Trustees and the Superintendent and his staff thank you. Your patience, encouragement, and resilience have sustained us throughout this journey. While there is still work to be done, we are proud of the progress that has been made and confident that, together, we are building a Salem campus that will safely serve our children for many years to come.

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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. Will Salem Attendance Center open on time?

Yes. Students are scheduled to begin school on August 4, 2026. While some construction activities will continue after students return, the District has worked closely with the project architect, engineers, contractor, and other professionals to prepare the campus for occupancy.

2. Is it safe for students to return to campus?

Yes. Student and staff safety has been the District's highest priority throughout this project. Construction areas will remain separated from students through barriers, restricted access areas, and traffic control measures where necessary. Areas that are not ready for occupancy will remain closed until they are determined to be safe for use.

3. Has the school been tested for mold?

Yes. Professional microbial testing was conducted throughout multiple areas of the campus in June 2026. Testing identified one area with elevated airborne mold - the Old Gym. Several localized areas involving water-damaged ceiling tiles and HVAC vents.

The affected ceiling tiles have been removed, the HVAC vents have been cleaned, and the Old Gym has been removed from the District's long-term plans and approved for demolition.

4. Was asbestos found in any school buildings?

No. The District's 3-year AHERA Reinspection Report concluded that no asbestos-containing materials were identified as applicable to the restoration project at Salem Attendance Center.

5. Why isn't all of the construction finished yet?

The original project focused on repairing tornado damage. As construction progressed, previously hidden structural conditions were discovered inside several older buildings. Those discoveries required additional engineering evaluations, revised designs, School Board action, and discussions with the District's insurance carrier before work could continue.

6. Why was the Old Gym not repaired?

During construction, engineers discovered significant structural deficiencies that were not apparent during the initial damage assessment.

After reviewing those findings, the School Board determined that investing additional funds into repairing the aging structure was not in the District's long-term best interest. Instead, the Board approved demolition of the building and redirected portions of the project to improve pedestrian access to the New Gym.

7. What is happening with the auditorium?

As work progressed, deterioration was discovered within the original flat roof beneath the existing pitched roof. Engineers determined this deterioration is the result of long-term aging rather than tornado damage.

The District is currently evaluating the cost of extensive structural repairs compared to demolition and replacement before making a final decision.

8. Why are the sidewalks and covered walkways still unfinished?

The sidewalks and covered walkways were intentionally resequenced after the decision to demolish the Old Gym.

Rather than rebuilding walkways to a building that would no longer be used, the project was revised to construct sidewalks and covered walkways serving the New Gym, providing a safer and more practical route for students and staff.

9. Why won't the insurance company pay for everything?

Insurance policies cover damage caused by the tornado. During construction, engineers identified several structural conditions that existed before the storm.

The insurance carrier determined those conditions were pre-existing and therefore outside the scope of covered storm damage.

Even when insurance has declined coverage for certain structural improvements, the District has continued evaluating ways to complete the necessary work to provide safe, structurally sound facilities.

10. How much of the project has been completed?

As reflected in the July 3, 2026 pay application, nearly half (49%) of the overall construction contract has been completed.

Although some of the most visible work remains underway, substantial progress has been made throughout the campus, including structural repairs, roofing work, mechanical and electrical improvements, demolition, and interior restoration.

11. Why can't the District simply rebuild exactly what was there before?

The District's responsibility extends beyond restoring buildings to their pre-tornado condition.

When previously hidden structural deficiencies are discovered, the District must determine whether investing additional funds into aging facilities is the best long-term use of public resources or whether replacement provides a safer and more sustainable solution.

12. Who decides whether buildings are safe?

Construction and occupancy decisions are made through collaboration among the project architect, licensed engineers, the contractor, district administration, and the School Board, when required.

The District relies on qualified design professionals to evaluate structural conditions and recommend appropriate corrective action.

13. Will construction continue after school starts?

Yes. Some work will continue after students return. Construction activities will be managed to minimize disruption to the instructional day while maintaining appropriate safety measures around active work areas.

14. How is the District paying for this project?

The restoration project is funded through a combination of insurance proceeds, local District funds, and FEMA/MEMA disaster assistance funds. As additional structural deficiencies have been discovered, the District has evaluated each situation individually to determine the most responsible long-term solution while being mindful of taxpayer resources.

15. What is the District's long-term goal?

The goal is not simply to repair buildings damaged by the tornado. The goal is to ensure Salem Attendance Center provides students and staff with facilities that are safe, structurally sound, functional, and capable of serving the community for many years into the future.

16. Why has this project taken so long?

Major school construction projects rarely proceed exactly as originally planned, particularly when they involve older buildings that have sustained significant storm damage. As construction progressed, additional structural conditions were discovered that required engineering evaluations, revised construction documents, School Board approvals, insurance review, and additional procurement processes. While these developments extended portions of the project timeline, they also allowed the District to make informed decisions that prioritize safety, responsible stewardship of public funds, and the long-term needs of Salem Attendance Center.

17. Why has the football field lighting taken longer than expected?

The original construction contract included replacing only the two football field light poles damaged by the tornado. As the project progressed, the District decided to replace the remaining lighting as well so the entire football field would utilize the same Musco lighting system recently installed at the Salem baseball field, providing consistent equipment, controls, and long-term maintenance.

During the procurement process, it was also determined that the originally proposed lighting fixtures did not meet the Buy American requirements applicable to FEMA-funded projects. Additional coordination was therefore required to identify a compliant lighting system that also met the District's long-term goals.

At approximately the same time, the overall project was temporarily paused while significant structural issues involving the Old Gym, Auditorium, and High School were evaluated by engineers and the insurance carrier. Those project-wide evaluations also delayed final approval of the lighting package.

Now that the necessary approvals have been received, the District moved forward with ordering four Musco lighting systems together (poles and light assemblies), reducing future mobilization and shipping costs while providing a modern, consistent lighting system for the entire football stadium.

18. Why is the District replacing four football field light poles instead of only the two damaged by the tornado?

Although the tornado damaged only two football field light poles, the District determined that replacing all four poles at the same time represented the most responsible long-term investment. Completing the work as a single project reduces future mobilization, shipping, and installation costs while providing a consistent Musco lighting system for the entire football field. The necessary change orders were approved, and the lighting package is released for manufacture.