



Avonworth school annex taking shape

Teachers tour construction site

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By Jill Cueni-Cohen

For three years, Angela Schlumpf has been teaching Avonworth Elementary School gifted and math enrichment students in a modular unit -- a temporary facility that is not connected to the building.

"The students lose instructional time, because I have to go into the building, gather them together, get their coats on and then bring them out to the modular classroom," said Mrs. Schlumpf, who has been teaching in the district since 1991. "Precious moments are lost when you're gathering kids and bringing them to a different location."

This difficulty will be nothing more than a memory in 2014-15, when the district opens a \$23.7 million primary center for students in kindergarten through second grade. Built to meet the needs of the district's increasing enrollment, the primary center will be behind the elementary school on Roosevelt Road.

Several teachers said it was exciting to enter the unfinished 84,000 square-foot building for the first time. Expected to be completed in April,

the two-story school will give seven classrooms per grade, a cavernous gymnasium/auditorium, cafeteria, library, outdoor rubber-surfaced playground, and restrooms.

Watching the teachers taking pictures with their camera phones as they roamed through halls of naked steel beams and newly constructed dry wall, Superintendent Thomas Ralston commented on the overcrowded conditions in the current elementary school that led the district to consider building the Primary Center eight years ago.

"We're the second-fastest growing district in Western Pennsylvania," he said. "The new building will allow us to make this an environment for our students that's much more conducive to learning."

Next year, the elementary school will house grades three, four and five. There are currently 780 students in grades K-5.

Scott Miller, assistant elementary school principal, said the teachers are responsible for creating the Primary Center's environment.

"Representatives from each grade level met with the architect to choose color schemes, furniture, tile, carpets, etc...," said Mr. Miller, noting that they're taking a nontraditional approach. "They made sure the tile patterns in the halls wouldn't be predictable. For instance, the cafeteria has different tiles randomly scattered all over the place; to instill a sense of fun and whimsy, where kids can feel engaged, like this is their home away from home."

Mr. Miller explained that the school has been designed to resemble a large house, with each grade having its own neighborhood of classrooms.

The core area -- gymnasium with stage, offices, music room, computer lab, library, art room, support services, cafeteria and faculty room -- is near the main entrance, with easy access to each grade level grouping.

"The teachers picked out an accent color for each wall which will match the neighborhood color theme of that grade level," he noted.

First grade teacher Kathy Reichart said the neighborhood concept will provide a large group instruction area that will allow teachers to team teach and collaborate with students as a group.

A panoramic view from the library offers a glimpse of the woods below as well as two cobblestone manufacturing plants and Interstate 279.

Representing the school district in the construction process, Paul Zippel, who headed up the teacher's tour, noted points of interest such as a full-sized competition basketball and volleyball court.

Mr. Ralston said it has been easy working with HHSDR Architects/Engineers of Sharon and General Contractor PJ Dick of Pittsburgh and he credited former superintendent Valerie McDonald, who retired in 2012, for her part in making the dream a reality nearly a decade ago.

Mike Chambers, project manager for PJ Dick, said construction of the building was the easiest part of the project.

"The site location was very difficult," he said, explaining the 70-foot elevation difference between the old elementary school and the new center required construction of five segmented retaining walls and a 650-

foot soil mill wall to hold the steep hillside in place. The site work alone cost \$5 million, according to Mr. Ralston.

Looking at Avonworth's future school, Mr. Ralston said the district also is celebrating its 75th birthday this year. "This district has a rich history and unique traditions," he said, noting that Avonworth Union School District was created in 1938 from former school districts Ben Avon, Ben Avon Heights, Emsworth, and Kilbuck, making it the first union school district in Pennsylvania.

Ohio Township joined the growing school district in 1955, which led to construction of the elementary school on Roosevelt Road in 1960. By 1967, the Pennsylvania Department of Education formally approved the formation of the Avonworth School District, and the high school was built in 1970 on 43 acres of the Crawford farm. Avonworth Middle School was completed in 2000.

Mr. Ralston said the district will commemorate its birthday throughout the year.

He said the anniversary will be tied in with opening the primary center at the beginning of the next school year.

"It will be amazing to be in the same building as all the other classrooms," Mrs. Schlumpf said, adding that she's especially looking forward to the smooth transition of students as they go from class to class without leaving the building.



