

## **Building a foundation - Kennedy Elementary at the - Omaha World-Herald (NE) - October 20, 2015 - page 01A**

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It might comfort **Howard Kennedy Elementary** students to know that their future principal gets homework, too.

Between flying back and forth to Atlanta for classroom observations, researching different ways to tackle math instruction and figuring out staffing levels for next year, Principal Tony Gunter sometimes feels like he's spinning plates.

"I've got to keep everything moving at the same time without anything falling or breaking," he said.

His assignment? Help reinvent struggling **Howard Kennedy Elementary**, the educational linchpin of the plan to transform the surrounding Highlander neighborhood in north Omaha.

Efforts by 75 North to transform the poverty-stricken neighborhood will not be complete without a strong school at its hub, 75 North executive director Othello Meadows said at a groundbreaking ceremony this month for new, mixed-income housing at the Highlander development.

"Housing is great, community amenities are great, but the education that we're pushing for in this partnership with (Omaha Public Schools) is really the game-changer in this whole, entire thing," Meadows said.

Starting next fall, the school's participation in the 75 North project will usher in a host of changes, including Gunter as the new principal and a curriculum with a heavy focus on science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM), not to mention the possibility of staff and teacher turnover.

The revamped Kennedy will have a school-based health clinic where kids can pop in for shots or a strep throat test and a vision center providing eye exams and glasses. Classes will emphasize hands-on, project-based learning, and a stronger early childhood education pipeline will help funnel pre-K kids to Kennedy.

Students will attend school from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. — 45 minutes more than most elementary students do — and five extra days will be added to the school calendar.

Even smaller details are being looked at with fresh eyes. Gunter noted that only a handful of kids are enrolled in the school's band program.

"I told my band teacher, 'Give me a wish list,'" he said. "We just need instruments — something that simple."

Students have clamored for class pets, a feat Gunter pulled off as principal of Westside's Hillside

Elementary, where kids learned alongside — and from — fish, hermit crabs and four bearded dragons.

“You wouldn’t believe the impact that had,” Gunter said of the bearded dragons. “Kids would get to school before I would and they became their little managers. Kids who didn’t have an interest in school, who had a hard time getting there, they were there.”

OPS officials are careful to say they’re not “fixing” a broken school but are rebuilding it with a stronger foundation. Staff members who felt blindsided last year by the 75 North partnership resented insinuations that Kennedy was a failing school.

“When we look at the term ‘fixing something,’ it means it’s broken,” Gunter said. “It means we’re going to take what’s currently there and repair it so it works. That’s not what’s happening. We’re talking about a new philosophy, a different approach, a different model.”

That new model could include some staff shakeups. That’s been the biggest piece of uncertainty for Kennedy’s current teachers, Gunter said.

Kennedy, which has about 300 kids enrolled in pre-K through sixth grade, is one of OPS’s highest-poverty schools. Ninety-seven percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Years of lackluster state test scores have landed the school on a list of the state’s lowest-performing schools.

There have been small victories — sixth grade math and reading scores are on the rise, and the school earned an OPS gold award last year for testing gains. Officials praise a dedicated squad of staff and parents who are fiercely devoted to Kennedy students.

But just 35 percent of fourth graders scored proficient in reading last year. Nineteen percent were proficient in math.

Students face a host of struggles: One-quarter are refugees and English Language Learners. The school’s mobility rate, which indicates kids who attend different schools within the same school year, is more than twice the state average.

The school’s previous principal, Phyllis Brooks, retired last year. This is a planning year for Gunter, who will take over as the school’s sole principal next fall. Elizabeth Holland is the principal this year and handles the day-to-day operations of the school.

Previously an assistant principal at Buffett Middle, Holland said her work at Kennedy so far has revolved around building a positive school climate and getting kids more engaged in their schoolwork.

Small but meaningful gestures have impact, she said. Staff can wear jeans on Fridays, and she holds drawings for a special parking spot.

On a bulletin board, staff posted photos of themselves as kids and shared their favorite book or their school personality — who was the bookworm and who was the chatterbox. Kids have had fun

guessing who's who, Holland said.

She and Gunter also devised a system to encourage positive behavior, called STARS, which reminds kids to be smart, trustworthy, attentive, responsible and respectful.

"The idea is we can catch students doing one of those pieces and recognize them," Holland said. "Children want that praise, they want to do well and they're looking for opportunities to better themselves."

Gunter is the big-picture guy. He has worked in OPS and Westside schools for almost two decades, minus a short stint working as an education development executive for Apple.

The opportunity at Kennedy grabbed his attention.

"This kind of job has my name written on it," he said.

"That whole 68111 and 68110 ZIP code has been my personal stomping grounds as a kid," he continued. "And all up and down that particular area over the years, I've just seen it change, and it wasn't for the better — houses being boarded up and land isn't kept up. It was tough seeing that happen. When this came along, it just sparked my interest."

During this planning year, Gunter is spending his time working on the STEAM curriculum, researching math and reading intervention strategies and flying to Atlanta for a week every month as part of a fellowship with Purpose Built Schools. That's a spin-off of the Purpose Built Communities organization, which lies behind neighborhood revitalization projects like 75 North.

The 75 North organization is paying for his salary, training and travel this year. The project is being funded by several philanthropic organizations, including Susie Buffett's Sherwood Foundation, the William and Ruth Scott Foundation and the Lozier Foundation.

In Atlanta, Gunter spends time meeting with teachers and administrators and observing classrooms at the Charles R. Drew Charter School, the model for Kennedy and other schools in Purpose Built Communities.

"I interview parents. I ask, 'How do you like it here at Drew?'

" he said. "Not one person has anything bad to say about that school. They love the opportunities kids have. They love the project-based learning, the extended school day, believe it or not. The teachers. Even the parents like the parents. They like one another."

Located in Atlanta's East Lake neighborhood, an area whose crime statistics once earned it the nickname "Little Vietnam," the school opened in 2000 and was Atlanta's first charter school.

The school struggled initially. But test scores there are now some of the highest in the state of Georgia. Last year, 98 percent of fourth-graders passed the state reading test and 97 percent passed math. There's a lengthy waiting list to gain admittance.

The majority of the school's students are black, and about 60 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, a rate that has dropped in recent years as the neighborhood has gentrified.

The idea is to borrow the ingredients that have made Drew a success — project-based learning, small class sizes and energized teachers who understand the school's mission, agree to work longer hours and hold high expectations — while keeping in mind Kennedy's own demographics and culture.

Unlike Kennedy, Drew, for example, has a lower percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch and virtually no ELL students, and it was built from scratch. Kennedy has decades worth of history and students, staff and parents who will be asked to swallow big changes.

OPS board member Yolanda Williams said the 75 North/Kennedy project is a "blessing" for local families, but she said the district needs to be transparent with staff about the changes coming down the pipeline.

"This time last year, everyone was up in arms. They didn't understand what was going on," she said. "We need to focus on giving those teachers support and help them transition into their role, whether it's at Kennedy or another school where they're going to be effective and happy and can finish their career on a high note."

Parent E.J. Smith, who has a kindergartner and first grader at Kennedy, is excited about what he has heard so far. He likes Holland's style as principal and thinks the proposed curriculum will challenge and engage students.

"It's going to be a great transformation," he said. "I see it happening now. As far as the educational part, it's super."

But Smith said too many parents and community members still have no idea what the 75 North project is.

"When I'm walking in the neighborhood or I see a person, I ask that question: 'Do you know what 75 North is?' They say, 'the freeway,'

" Smith said. "That tells me they don't know what's going on, and I hate that."

Officials acknowledge it's going to take a lot of shoe leather and door-knocks to spread the word about the Highlander revival. Parent and community buy-in is key.

"It's about talking to parents, getting parents to trust you, to believe you're somebody who's trying to provide a greater opportunity for their child," Meadows said.

"This isn't something me and you talk about for 20 seconds and you're going to get what I'm talking about. There's no elevator speech for this."

## Schools reimagined

Three local elementary schools in north Omaha are piloting innovative ways to raise up struggling or low-income students.

Kennedy Elementary, OPS

Launch date: Next August

Curriculum: Emphasis on hands-on, project-based learning and STEAM curriculum, strong early childhood education program

More time: Five more days in the school year and 45 more minutes in the school day, which will run from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Staff: New principal, potential staff changes

Health clinic: School-based health clinic providing vaccinations, some basic medical care, a vision center for eye exams and glasses

Community partnership: Partnership with the 75 North redevelopment project, targeting the nearby Highlander neighborhood, where mixed-income housing and a community center will be built

Funding: A mix of grants, additional OPS dollars and a \$1.7 million contribution from 75 North for 2016, which is funded by several organizations, including the Sherwood, Lozier and William and Ruth Scott Foundations. OPS will increasingly take over costs of additional programming from 75 North.

Wakonda Elementary, OPS

Launch date: August 2015

Curriculum: More technology in the classroom, more intervention and enrichment time for students, three coaches hired to work on technology, student data and student behavior issues

More time: School days run from 8:20 a.m. to 4 p.m., 25 minutes longer than most OPS elementary school days

Staff: New principal, 19 new teachers and coaches

Community involvement: Community engagement efforts, including a revamped parent room and a welcome-back barbecue

Funding: A five-year, \$1.6 million federal school improvement grant tied to No Child Left Behind

Nelson Mandela Elementary

Launch date: New school opened in August

Curriculum: Singapore math, Spalding reading, daily violin lessons and recess every 90 minutes

More time: Extended calendar that adds up to about seven more weeks of school than OPS, and an extended day that runs from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Staff: Principal Susan Toohey, formerly the head of school at Marian High

Family involvement: Free tuition, though parents are expected to volunteer on a regular basis

Funding: Privately funded by the Lozier Foundation

—Erin Duffy

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