

## **OPS joins makeover bid for poor neighborhood - - Omaha World-Herald (NE) - April 7, 2015 - page 01B**

April 7, 2015 | Omaha World-Herald (NE) | Erin Duffy | Page 01B

The Omaha school board seized the chance Monday to reinvent one of the city's highest-poverty schools, voting 8-0 to approve a plan that will connect **Howard Kennedy Elementary** with a north Omaha neighborhood revitalization effort.

The school's involvement with the project, called 75 North, is expected to usher in sweeping changes — including a new principal, new curriculum and a longer school day and school year — in time for the 2016-17 school year.

The partnership with Omaha Public Schools is the latest development for 75 North, which aims to transform the Highlander neighborhood, once the site of the Pleasantview Homes public housing project.

Katie Underwood was absent from Monday's meeting.

75 North is part of a national network called Purpose Built Communities, backed by Warren Buffett and several other wealthy philanthropists and developers.

The Purpose Built model zeroes in on a lone, struggling neighborhood and creates a wrap-around redevelopment strategy: building high-quality, mixed-income housing; emphasizing early-childhood education and a strong neighborhood school; and providing community services to residents, such as health care and job training.

Purpose Built Communities exist in eight cities, including Atlanta, Indianapolis and Charlotte, North Carolina.

The first phase in Omaha — construction of 109 mixed-income rentals on both sides of 30th Street between Parker and Patrick Streets — should break ground this fall.

But a revival of the Highlander neighborhood won't be complete without a high-performing school at its center, supporters said Monday night.

"As a young professional focused around the Highlander area, I'd really like to live there if the schools in the area showed they were on the right track," one parent said.

Kennedy Elementary, at 30th and Binney Streets, was selected because of its proximity, but it's also ripe for improvement, said Othello Meadows, executive director of Seventy-Five North Revitalization Corp.

The school has made positive gains in state test scores in recent years, earning an OPS gold medal

award for student achievement. But less than half its students scored proficient on math, reading and science tests last year, and the school has been labeled one of the lowest-performing in Nebraska.

Nearly 98 percent of Kennedy students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Nearly one-quarter are refugees.

Changes to Kennedy would be modeled after those to schools in other Purpose Built communities, specifically Drew Charter School in Atlanta, which OPS officials and board members toured last year.

The school is a top performer in Georgia and boasts a long waiting list for enrollment. Last year 98 percent of its fourth-graders scored proficient on state reading tests and 97 percent scored proficient in math.

75 North officials asked the board to support several key proposals for Kennedy: a new principal; early-childhood education; a curriculum focused on science, technology, engineering, art and math — advocates dub this STEAM — and project-based learning; and a longer school day and year.

Students would attend school from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. — one hour longer than most elementary students — and five extra days would be added to the school calendar.

More staff would be added to the school, including a social worker, assistant principal and a math and reading specialist. Part-time art, band and strings teachers would become full time.

All of that would add millions to Kennedy's annual budget. OPS would kick in some of the additional funds, while 75 North would pay up to \$1.7 million in additional costs in 2016. Federal grants would cover the rest.

Over the next decade the district would increase its contribution. By 2026 the district would cover all additional costs associated with improving Kennedy. OPS also could apply for a federal school improvement grant that could defray costs by \$50,000 to \$200,000.

The funding strategy spurred plenty of conversation among board members, who debated whether the district should apply for another school improvement grant. OPS already is applying for a grant for Wakonda Elementary.

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