

## **Their challenge: Turn around school along with - Omaha World-Herald (NE) - June 22, 2016 - page 01A**

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**Howard Kennedy Elementary** staff members grabbed partners and gave “salmon” high-fives, slapping their hands against each other’s forearms like wriggling fish.

At the urging of a facilitator, staffers were told to share what they were most nervous about for the coming school year. In a week full of training and professional development, this day was devoted to a series of team-building exercises meant to establish trust and foster a spirit of collaboration.

“I’m most nervous about the unknown,” one teacher confided to another during the training last week.

It’s true that Kennedy Elementary, one of the Omaha Public Schools’ perennially struggling schools, will look very different next year.

The school has a new principal, Tony Gunter. Three-quarters of the teaching staff is new. When school opens in August, there will be a new curriculum, heavy on project-based learning and science, technology, engineering, art and math, or STEAM. Students will spend 45 more minutes in class daily than most OPS elementary students and will report back to school a week earlier than most of their OPS classmates.

Students even voted to overhaul the school colors, from blue and yellow to black and gold.

It’s a revival spurred by a neighborhood project, 75 North, that aims to lift up the north Omaha neighborhood that surrounds Kennedy, at 30th and Binney Streets. 75 North is part of the Purpose Built Communities network co-founded by Warren Buffett.

A key component of that effort, 75 North backers say, is a strong school. Kennedy has made progress on math and reading state test scores in recent years but is on a list of the state’s lowest-achieving schools. Boosters pledge that the school will one day rank among the best in Nebraska.

That’s an ambitious goal considering Kennedy’s challenges.

It is one of OPS’s highest-poverty schools, with 97 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch last year. The school typically has a large number of students who are refugees or learning English for the first time. Its mobility rate is high, meaning kids bounce around from school to school.

Kennedy isn’t the only struggling OPS school getting extra attention.

Wakonda Elementary began a restructuring effort last school year, spurred by a federal grant meant to turn around low-performing schools.

In January, OPS formed a committee, called REACH, that works with 17 schools that have low state test scores or have more difficulty dealing with student behavior. Supervisors or consultants meet with the schools on a weekly basis to study school data, observe classrooms or coach teachers and principals. A full-time school-support liaison has been assigned to schools without an assistant principal.

Gunter and his staff hope to reverse the trajectory at Kennedy.

Kennedy will be modeled after other schools, such as Charles R. Drew Charter School in Atlanta, that have benefited from similar neighborhood rebuilding efforts and seen test scores and enrollment climb.

A key piece of preparing for the school's rebranding was finding the right staffers, Gunter said. Preparing them for the new school year — teachers spent last week immersed in training — will consume much of the summer.

Many of those staffers are new to Kennedy. Only 23 percent of the school's staff from last year will return this August — some opted against reapplying for their jobs, and some transferred to other schools. "I've got a group of people who don't know each other," Gunter said.

At the Omaha Outward Bound School, which fosters teamwork, staff members got to know one another through icebreaker activities. In groups, they worked together to complete different tasks, such as building a tower out of rods or making shapes with a knotted rope while blindfolded.

Throughout the week, the staff toured the neighborhood around Kennedy and dug into the school's new math, literacy and language development curriculums. Throughout the summer, focus groups will meet occasionally to explore teaching strategies in depth.

Ashley Hawthorne spent the past six years teaching first grade at Kennedy. She decided to stay and will take on a new role as a counselor and try to act as a bridge between Kennedy families and new staff. "I did create very close bonds with the previous staff," she said. "That was the hard part."

She, like many Kennedy teachers, was nervous when she first heard of the proposed changes. "I didn't know how it would affect me as a teacher, how it would affect my students. But I'm ecstatic about the new changes."

The influx of new staffers means that the average experience of Kennedy teachers has dropped from 11 years to eight, but slightly more teachers have master's degrees.

Several teaching positions — art and music, for example — have become full time, and three new deans will focus on each of three areas: STEAM curriculum, literacy and student behavior. The school will have a full-time psychologist and a part-time social worker.

"Finding the right fit with teachers and staff, that was a major piece of moving all this forward and planning for the new year," Gunter said. "One of the most important questions that I asked everyone is: 'Why do you want to work here?'"

Kylie Hudnall is fresh out of college at Wichita State and will teach third grade at Kennedy. At a career fair, she was drawn to the school's experimental, innovative attitude, something she found lacking in Kansas schools crippled by state budget cuts.

"I got online, did a little research on the school, and I really wanted to be a part of what's going on at Kennedy," she said.

Sarah Hoffman, one of Kennedy's new kindergarten teachers, previously taught at Wakonda Elementary. She left OPS for a year to lead a day care but missed the classroom.

She acknowledges that she'll have to learn a different style of teaching.

Kennedy is big on project-based learning and will zero in on kids who are falling behind in the core subjects with targeted interventions at the school's new math and literacy centers. The school will use OPS's Go Math! program, but also will incorporate parts of Singapore Math, a curriculum that focuses on number sense and is used at the Lozier Foundation-funded Nelson Mandela Elementary, which opened last year.

"It's good to know you're a part of something big," Hoffman said. "There's so much impact you can have at Kennedy."

There's room to grow. In the 2014-15 school year, just 35 percent of Kennedy's fourth-graders scored proficient in reading. Nineteen percent were proficient in math.

The student population will be smaller in the next school year, with about 180 kids enrolled, down from 220. OPS is moving sixth-graders from several elementary schools, including Kennedy, to middle schools.

One bright spot is the early childhood program, which is filled mostly with neighborhood kids who Gunter hopes will stay at Kennedy once they start kindergarten. Previously, only a handful of Head Start and pre-K students lived in the school's attendance area.

As the first housing phase of the 75 North project wraps up next summer, Gunter and 75 North's executive director, Othello Meadows, predict that more families will want to be a part of Kennedy's reinvention.

Gunter was recently shooting hoops with some neighborhood kids when a 9-year-old rode up on his bike. "He said, 'Hey, I'm coming to your school. My mom says you're going to be a magnet school, you'll have all the science.'"

Kennedy isn't a magnet school, but that didn't bother Gunter. He knows that it will take time for parents and neighbors to absorb all the changes.

"It's nice to know they're talking about it," he said. "To hear that excitement from a 9-year-old who rides up on his bike and has that much excitement about coming to school, that's just a great feeling."

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New approaches for reaching struggling or low-income students

Kennedy Elementary, OPS

Launch date: August 2016; school was chosen due to its proximity to the Highlander neighborhood, the site of the 75 North redevelopment project

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, large percentage of new staff

Community partnership: The 75 North revitalization effort, where mixed-income housing and a community center will be built on the grounds of the former Pleasantview Homes housing project

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

Nelson Mandela Elementary

Launch date: New school opened in August 2015

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 School

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

Funding: Privately funded by the Lozier Foundation

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

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, volunteers from neighboring organizations such as Clair Memorial United Methodist Church and a welcome-back barbecue

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

#### **CITATION (APA STYLE)**

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