

1 campus, at last, for Duke School

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Oct. 17--DURHAM -- After 15 years of having classes three miles apart, Duke School soon will have all of its 445 students on one campus.

The preschool through eighth-grade school is holding a groundbreaking ceremony Saturday for \$13 million of additions to its Old Erwin Road middle school campus, allowing it eventually to close the lower school at 1516 Hull Ave.

And as school officials and parents said proudly on Tuesday, the campus will be integrated in more ways than one. It is also custom-designed to fulfill Duke School's educational philosophy of project-based learning.

"We think the facilities are pretty cutting edge," said Dave Michelman, the head of the school.

Duke School, established in 1947 as a lab school for students in the psychology and education departments at Duke University, became independent in 1984 when a group of parents turned it into a nonprofit organization supported by Terry Sanford, former Duke president, N.C. governor and U.S. senator.

The school teaches students using both instructional teaching and interdisciplinary projects, allowing students to focus on their own curiosity.

"If you think about a conventional school building, almost all the spaces are the same. They're designed for a teacher and a certain number of students," Michelman said. "The space we're designing, particularly for the middle school, allows for students to work individually."

The school will have conference-like rooms where groups of students can congregate and work on projects together for days. The design by Fielding Nair International, a firm specializing in learning environments, also integrates indoor and outdoor spaces to allow students to study outside.

The construction project will increase the school's current size by 50 percent, to 52,500 square feet.

Classrooms, gymnasiums and libraries at 3716 Old Erwin Road will more than double in size and include the latest educational equipment like LCD projectors, portable SMART whiteboards and wireless hubs.

"The idea is to create an infrastructure for current and the next generation of student learning," said spokeswoman Emily Buchler.

The new buildings also will be built on green principles and use recycled materials, solar hot water heating and motion detectors to dim lights.

So many improvements at once isn't cheap.

The school is paying for the project with a mix of fundraising, bond financing and a lease buyout of the Hull Avenue facility by Duke University. The building is on Duke's campus.

By next week, Michelman said, the school will have secured about \$11 million in financing from all sources.

The school's own fundraising goal by parents and teachers is \$4 million and has already reached more than \$2.4 million after the first year.

John Pinto, a managing partner at Brightleaf Capital, a venture capital firm in downtown Durham, is co-chairman of the capital campaign steering committee along with his wife, Beth.

The couple has two sets of twins in the school, 5-year-old boys and 8-year-old girls.

"For my kids, I've found it's been a great environment for them. They enjoy going to school," he said. "The program is an outstanding program. The parents and the students are top-notch and 'aspirational,' but the facilities were significantly outmatched."

When construction is finished, the current middle school will be used by second through fourth-grade students.

The new cluster of buildings include one for preschoolers, one for kindergarteners and a middle school "campus" of sorts that has one building for fifth- and sixth-graders, one for seventh- and eighth-graders and a building for arts, music classes and the library.

The design also alleviates parental concerns about whether teenagers and 4-year-olds can peacefully co-exist. The middle-schoolers' digs will be somewhat separated from the rest.

"From our perspective, that's great," Pinto said. "But I do hope the school is successful in doing more big brother, big sister programs."

The project, three years in the planning, is expected to be finished in time for the start of the 2009-10 school year.

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