



LES floor plan

# USD 495 elementary school project nears construction phase

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After years of campaigning and months of preparation, for the USD 495 school district, the fun soon begins.

"It's an exciting time, for us," said USD 495 Superintendent Jon Flint, as the district enters the construction phase for its K-5 elementary school in north Larned. "When we started, ever since the bond issue passed, our architects have been meeting with staff to formalize what we wanted the building to look like - what rooms we wanted, what we wanted in the rooms. Now we get to see what they have planned for us."

USD 495's architects, Howard & Helmer, last week presented the district with bidding drawings, architectural renderings and cost estimates for its 80,000 sq. ft., 515-student capacity elementary building taking up the lion's share of the district's \$22.2 million total bond issue. While the structure will be state-of-the-art in terms of guidelines such as classroom organization, peripheral services and safety and security technological concerns, the finished product will reflect an important link to Pawnee County's past, Flint noted.

The timeline for

construction has already begun to heat up, with bids going out to sub-contractors last Friday under the supervision of the district's Construction Manager at-Risk, Simpson Construction of Wichita. The district was to be meeting with city zoning officials on Jan. 28, in anticipation of a March groundbreaking. "We didn't want to have just a ceremonial groundbreaking," Flint said. "Once we break ground, things are really going to start to happen."

June 2017 is the target completion date for the new building, in time for the beginning of school that August.

In a time when most new school buildings look and feel like schools, elementary school students at USD 495 will see and feel the heritage offered by the area's first structure, Fort Larned National Historic site. "From the beginning, we have kept in mind the heritage that Fort Larned gives to us. We want our children to be able to share in the heritage experience from an early age," Flint said.

To start, the basic one-level, winged building structure not only meets prescribed ADA requirements, it mirrors the period ranch-style construction of the Fort's historic quadrangle. It is especially evident in the school's

media center, which will be constructed along the lines of the Fort's hexagonal stone-and-wood blockhouse. "We're bringing in the sandstone look from the Fort," Flint said. "The blockhouse's hexagonal shape is the basic pattern for the media center. Inside is continuation in the vaulted ceiling, with the radiating wood beams carrying through."

The school's main hallway has been named "The Trail." Floor coverings have been selected that call to mind the wood and gravel walkways and the grass parade ground at the Fort.

Inside the media center and throughout the building, among the wood textures and metal-look counters, will be the trappings of the 21st-century educational paradigm. Smartboards. Computers. Learning modules. And classrooms - grouped by grade in wings divided by grade level - offering not only separation for class instruction, but proximity for teachers and staff to communicate and collaborate.

Collaboration and consolidation into one building was also a primary goal from the beginning, Flint noted.

"In our old system, when a second grader moved up to third grade, he or she was in a different building," Flint said.

"It was hard for teachers to share information. Now, it's just a walk down the hall."

A special feature of the new plan is the incorporation of two learning modules adjacent to the classroom wings. The modules are basically spaces where an entire grade level can join together as a group for activities such as class plays, music presentations or other group learning activities. One module is located next to the kindergarten, first grade and pre-K rooms, with the other close to grades 3-5. "We are planning multiple opportunities to use those spaces," Flint said.

Another feature is the cafeteria and kitchen, designed to serve the students in one place, in one block of time. "That's another benefit of consolidation," Flint said. "We will be consolidating three kitchens down to one. We will be able to serve the student body basically in two different servings, but realistically, we'll probably do three. When we get closer to finishing the building and ready for the school year, we will be looking at schedules and timeframes."

The building offers art, music, technology and special education programs space to spread out. Flex rooms also give the district room to expand

for additional students, if necessary.

A unique feature to the building will be the addition of a "sensory room" for students with special need for a soothing, quiet place.

The concept, which was introduced by mental health professionals, has found a niche in education as students with special needs are kept in the mainstream.

Basically, the room utilizes a variety of therapeutic methods aimed at promoting self-organization and positive change. Sensory rooms provide a place for students to feel safe, while education professionals engage in crisis de-escalation strategies. As a result, students are encouraged to engage in self-care, self-nurturance, resilience and recovery.

"We will be one of the few elementary schools in the area that will have a sensory room, specifically designed for students needing to re-focus," Flint said. "We are working with a national organization that might be able to help fund some equipment."

The building's gymnasium will be regulation-size, with limited spectator seating. "Our intent was to be able to utilize the gym for practices," Flint said. "We will be able to have volleyball meets in there, but the main thing was to

have practice in the facility so that we could get kids home earlier."

Safety and security issues will also be addressed, from fenced playgrounds to card-access building entry, Flint said. Parents will be allowed into a vestibule, but to gain access to the building they must be buzzed in from the office. All building doors will be handled by a card-reader and cameras will be placed both internally and externally for supervision and safety. "In that regard, the building safety and security concerns have been met," Flint said.

Concurrent construction activity will also commence on renovations at Larned High School, which was also part of the district's bond issue. Renovations include the addition of a weights and conditioning center, for which the district has secured \$250,000 from a private donor.

Architectural drawings and renderings have been placed on exhibit for public viewing in the district office conference room.

"I would love for the community to come in and look at our display, to get an idea of what's going to happen," Flint said. "We're really happy with what we're seeing," Flint said. "Our new building says school and it says Pawnee County."



**"SEE YOU AT THE POLE"** - The school year has started and students are back in their routines. Students and teachers start arriving at the Larned High School around 7:00 a.m. and from then on it becomes a busy place. On Friday, August 21, 2015 students joined hands in a prayer circle at the high school flagpole. It started as a small group but as time went on it was enlarged to over 50 students. They came and joined in the circle praying for a good school year. Students and teachers alike were sharing their thoughts and prayers randomly for the Larned area and also the rest of the world. Fellowship of Christian Athletes has been sponsoring the "See You At The Pole" on the first Friday of the school year for about five years. FCA will also conduct a SYATP event on the national date, and then again the last week of school to honor seniors and wish them well. (photo reprinted from Aug. 25, 2015 Tiller & Toiler)