

Build it and they will come in January

By ADAM GOLDSTEIN Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, December 15, 2011 12:21 pm

AURORA | Darla Stumpp had to make certain adjustments when she started her job as the principal of Aurora Hills Middle School three years ago.

Stumpp had heard plenty about the spherical and severe building on South Uvalda Street. A Central High School graduate who went on to become a teacher in the Aurora Public Schools district and later assistant principal of Gateway High School, Stumpp was familiar with complaints from district teachers and former students about the building's shared classroom spaces, its lack of windows and its outdated design.

Still, getting used to working inside the school built in 1972 required patience, she recalls.

"I can tell you for me, it took time to get used to," Stumpp said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm in a submarine or something ... It's a challenging environment."

Stumpp and Aurora Hills students won't have to put up with those challenges for much longer. In January, classes will kick off in a brand new Aurora Hills Middle School building, a \$24.2-million structure funded as part of the \$208-million bond proposal passed by voters in 2008. The new 130,000-square-foot building includes a long list of updated features and modern architectural amenities, from color-coded classroom entries to ceiling fixtures known as Solatubes that draw on natural sunlight to light up a room.

"There is at least one room per subject matter for each community," Stumpp said, referring to the school's student base of sixth, seventh and eighth graders. "We can keep a middle school philosophy at Aurora Hills, so it doesn't become a junior high model," she added, insisting that Aurora Hills students will still have common teachers in each grade level.

That teaching structure has a specific aim in mind, Stumpp added: to cover a single subject from multiple angles and disciplines. Science and math teachers can give different perspective on a single topic, as can English and social studies instructors. As one of the three sites at APS designated as a host school for the International Baccalaureate program, Aurora Hills has made that philosophy a central part of its instruction.

The IB program, which also runs at Hinkley High and Wheeling Elementary schools, seeks to balance studies of languages, social studies, experimental sciences, mathematics and electives in a single, rigorous discipline. That approach is clear in the design and look of the new Aurora Hills building. The school includes a courtyard with the double-helix DNA shape incorporated into its architectural design, as well as labels like "THINKER," "COMMUNICATOR," "REFLECTIVE" and "RISK TAKER" spelled out in the concrete of the entrance.

"They have an IB logo right in the front entryway. They're really trying to identify this school as one of

the IB sites," said Rebecca Herbst, bond communications specialist for APS. "There is a lot in the program about responsible citizenship; they do a lot of community projects," she added, pointing to the IB logo that's embossed on the carpet in the entryway. "You're hit with that right away."

Refitting the Aurora Hills campus was a priority from the beginning of the 2008 bond project, Herbst added. The project initially envisioned as a renovation of the existing site progressed into a rebuild, after construction prices dropped as a result of the economic crash in 2008. The building designed by architects Slaterpaull and RB+B came in at less than \$25 million, only \$1 million more than the district estimated as the original cost of the renovation.

After the current building is demolished in 2012, materials from the old site will be recycled for future construction projects. Athletic fields will take the place of the Aurora Hills building that drew so many complaints during its nearly 40-year lifespan.

The move from the current site to the new building will take place during the district's winter break, with classes set to begin in early January. A formal open house ceremony will take place at 10 a.m. on Feb. 11, a time and date that was not accidental, according to Stumpp.

She wanted an early morning time for the ceremony, she said, so that plenty of sunshine could stream in through the building's windows. No one will feel as if they're stuck in a submarine, she insisted.

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