

## SCHOOL, CENTER PAIRING MAY START TREND IN AREA

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Vancouver, Washington

Now, it's just a fallow raspberry field.

But by fall 2002, a new school and community center in the Fruit Valley area will be a model of what's to come in Vancouver School District school buildings.

The Fruit Valley Elementary School and Community Learning Center which includes classrooms, a Head Start preschool classroom, a fitness center, a computer room and 24-hour child care is a design Vancouver school officials hope to duplicate, and one that echoes a strong national trend in school construction. The new center will replace a 1940s-era building.

About 120 Fruit Valley students and more than 100 parents, community members and public officials celebrated Thursday at the groundbreaking for the \$3.9 million school and center. Last week, the district dedicated a similar project, the \$7 million Jim Parsley Center, which houses a free health clinic, swimming pool, rock-climbing wall, gym, fitness rooms and classrooms.

The Fruit Valley project "is the model of the future," said Todd Horenstein, the district's facilities planner. "There's been a lot of talk recently and nationally of viewing the school as the center of the community."

A national trend

Districts nationwide are creating a new breed of schools, transforming old structures and building new ones. These new schools function as community centers, teaching students and serving various community needs, such as adult education and 24-hour child care.

Basic education programs in the centers are funded by the districts; other programs are funded through partnerships between the district and community organizations.

"It's a good way to stretch tax dollars," said Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. "It allows different agencies to share the cost of heat, electricity and security."

These community learning centers aren't a new idea, however. Nathan said educators long have wanted to create schools that involve and serve the community. But schools already teeming with students didn't have a place to put a free health clinic or even make room for Head Start.

Many schools were too new to tear down or remodel to incorporate these new ideas about community centers.

Now, the school construction landscape has changed.

Schools are getting older. In districts with construction dollars available, such as Vancouver, new community-style buildings are replacing stand-alone schools designed decades ago.

In other communities, a lack of funding for new buildings has forced school administrators to look in nontraditional places to put schools. Zoos, museums, malls and parks are some of the favored spots across the nation for these shared facilities.

In Gresham, Alpha High School students spend three hours a day in school programs and three hours in work-related activities in the community. A state-funded community employment center is inside the school, and college classes are offered in the evenings.

In Brooklyn, N.Y., El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice serves a low-income neighborhood with high school classes and a variety of community development and service programs. All of the programs are in the school.

In Cincinnati, Parham School, which serves low-income elementary students, has partnered with FamiliesFORWARD, a community agency that provides social services and other programs to families and students.

Partnerships are key to the success of these shared facilities, educators say.

"It reflects which organizations and leaders are far-sighted, and who can come together to make these projects work," Nathan said. "You can't do it alone."

Rick Melching, superintendent of the Evergreen School District, said he would like to see community centers in his district if the right partners and community services came together.

"It's really a function of funding," he said. "We've looked at the community centers before and the board is supportive of this concept of joint use of the facilities, but it all depends on the partnerships."

The Fruit Valley center has several partners: the Vancouver School District, Fruit Valley Neighborhood Association, Vancouver Housing Authority, Head Start of Clark County, the city of Vancouver, Clark County Community Services, Family Resource Center Network, Clark County 2010, the Port of Vancouver and Educational Service District 112.

Bountiful benefits

Horenstein said when the district started planning the Fruit Valley center about three years ago, officials didn't start with the idea to create a community center. The plans originally were to replace the aging building.

"When we started planning, we were out on the forefront (of the community center trend)," Horenstein said. "But we focused on what we could do for the community to help rejuvenate the older neighborhood and provide stability."

In Nathan's report, "Smaller, Safer, Saner, Successful Schools," he lists the benefits of community learning centers: Student achievement rises, dropout rates plummet and the community becomes more involved with its schools.

When a parent support center is designed into the school, it sends a powerful message that the school wants parents to be involved in the school's daily activities, Nathan reported.

Horenstein said the centers are designed to create healthier, smarter communities, where learning is a way of life.

"The net goal is that we start creating generations of students whose mind-set is that learning is a lifelong endeavor," he said. "It doesn't end at the end of school or after graduation."

#### AT A GLANCE

WHAT: Fruit Valley Elementary School and Community Learning Center

WHEN: Opens fall 2002

WHERE: The corner of Fruit Valley and La Frambois roads.

WHY: The new center and school will replace the current Fruit Valley School. The current building will be demolished and the site will be used for public housing development.

HOW MUCH: The \$3.9 million contract was awarded to Union Corner Construction Inc. of Vancouver.

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