

Posted on Fri, Aug. 08, 2008

New schools add cutting-edge features

BY LAURA FIGUEROA

Digital black boards, schoolwide wireless Internet access, cyber cafés -- modern features will make their debut alongside traditional school staples like hardcover textbooks and No. 2 pencils when two new public schools open in the Northwest Miami-Dade area on Aug. 18.

The start of the new school year will usher in a K-8 center in Doral and a middle school in Hialeah Gardens, as part of the Miami-Dade School District's opening of 11 new schools across the county.

"This is the most number of schools we have opened at once since the 1950s," said Victor Alonso, design officer for the school district.

The new facilities are part of the district's five-year, \$3.1 billion push to deal with overcrowding and meet class-size reductions approved by voters in 2002.

Alonso said the district is expected to meet the class-size amendment requirements by the 2010 deadline. The requirements include no more than 18 students in kindergarten through third-grade classes, no more than 22 students in fourth- through eighth-grade classrooms, and no more than 25 students per high school classroom.

In Doral, about 1,100 students are expected to pour through the doors of Dr. Rolando Espinosa K-8 Center, 11250 NW 86th St. The school, built to hold roughly 1,600 students, is expected to alleviate some of the crowding at nearby Eugenia B. Thomas Elementary, which houses some 2,000 students.

Expectations are high in Doral, where for the second year in a row all the city's public schools were graded "A" by the state Department of Education.

Leading the school in its inaugural run is Principal Reva Vangates. She was recently named principal of the year for the elementary school level at an educational summit in Orlando.

Vangates previously served as principal of Dr. Henry W. Mack/West Little River Elementary School - which was an F school before she got there and turned the grade around to a C in two years.

Doral's new school is named after Espinosa, an educator who taught for over 25 years not only in the Miami-Dade County public schools system, but also at St. Thomas University and Florida Memorial College. Espinosa died in July 2006 at the age of 80, according to the school's website.

Hialeah Gardens' new middle school is expected to alleviate overcrowding at a bevy of schools, including Jose Martí Middle, Ernest Graham K-8 Center, Henry H. Filer Middle, Meadowlane Middle, Palm Springs Middle and James Bright Middle.

The new school is expected to hold up to 1,666 students, but will start off with only roughly 900 sixth and seventh graders, until eighth grade is added next year.

Without an eighth-grade class, the school is using its spare space to house an additional 500 ninth-graders who eventually will occupy Hialeah Gardens High School when it opens in January 2009.

"We're still opening up with a pretty large number of students for the first day, and there's no telling how many will show up on the first day to register," said Martha Montiel, principal at Hialeah Gardens Middle School. Montiel, who grew up in Hialeah, was formerly the principal of Hialeah Middle School, and also served as an assistant principal at Lawton Chiles Middle School in Northwest Miami-Dade.

"This community runs through my blood," Montiel said.

Both schools, like most in the batch opening throughout the county, are fitted with high-tech resources like wireless Internet access, wireless microphones so teachers can be heard in noisy classrooms, and digital black boards known as "smart boards" that allow teachers to project Internet programs on the board.

Additionally, the Doral school will house a cyber café, a standard feature at new K-8 centers opening throughout the county.

The two new facilities are in addition to other school openings in the northwest area in the past year.

In December, Westland Hialeah High School, 4000 W. 18th Ave, opened its doors for 1,900 students. Other schools include: Northwest Miami-Dade Country Club Middle School, 18305 NW 75th Place, and Spanish Lakes Elementary School, 7940 NW 194th St.