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Schools prep students for globalized future

BY REBECCA DELLAGLORIA

Joining a growing number of new schools set to open when classes begin next week are two new K-8 centers in South Miami-Dade.

One will prepare students for possible future careers in medicine or agriculture, the other will offer students the chance to learn one of two languages: Spanish or Mandarin Chinese.

Coconut Palm and Mandarin Lakes K-8 Academies are two of 11 new schools that are scheduled to open Aug. 18. The K-8 centers will join the new \$98 million South Dade High School replacement building opened late last school year -- marking a new age of growth for Miami-Dade schools.

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

From Goulds to Naranja, the new schools will serve youngsters from pre-K through Grade 8, offering parents an alternative to the traditional middle school model made popular throughout the last two decades.

Coconut Palm K-8 Academy, at Southwest 244th Street and 124th Avenue, will focus its curriculum on agriscience and medical bio-technology, and Mandarin Lakes, at 12225 SW 280th St., will have two academies: business and communications and dual foreign-language -- Mandarin Chinese and Spanish.

"The whole idea here is to get the children thinking about careers as early as possible," said Evelyn Greer, the School Board member representing South Miami-Dade County. She is facing reelection.

So far, parents seem to be buying into the K-8 concept, said Aryam Alvarez, assistant principal of Coconut Palm K-8, who said the school has seen a flurry of parents rushing to register their children in recent weeks.

With a K-8 school, there is "not that transition of a new school, a new building, new pressure," between fifth and sixth grades, Alvarez said. "And if you have more than one child, even one who is 6 and one who is 13, you don't have to drive to different places."

Both Coconut Palm and Mandarin Lakes will be choice schools, meaning parents have the option of enrolling their middle-school aged children at their area middle school or the K-8.

Coconut Palm plans to eventually become a full magnet school, Alvarez said. It has already accepted 200 students from outside its attendance boundaries for the upcoming school year, she said.

Mandarin Lakes will join a growing number of schools across the county that offer Mandarin Chinese as a language course.

Other schools include Devon Aire K-8 Center; Southridge, Killian, Coral Gables and American high schools; Robert Morgan Educational Center; Lawton Chiles Middle; and Palm Springs North Elementary.

"We're not training enough Chinese speakers for the demand that's coming," Greer said.

"You might have a student that's bilingual in English and Spanish, and if you add Chinese, their marketability is incredible."

The new facilities, which each cost about \$22 million to build, said Greer, are part of the district's five-year \$3.1 billion push to deal with overcrowding and meet state mandated class size reductions.

Alonso, the district's design chief, said the school system is expected to meet the class-size amendment requirements approved by voters in 2002, by the 2010 deadline.

The requirements include no more than 18 students in kindergarten through third grade, no more than 22 students in a fourth- through eighth-grade classroom, and no more than 25 students per high school classroom.

And that goal has become easier to meet in South Miami-Dade than once anticipated, as a sluggish real estate market will lead to some scaled-back projects, Alonso said.

"We've pulled back noticeably from those areas that were expected to grow the most," he said.