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New Miami-Dade schools await thousands of students

BY LAURA FIGUEROA

When the new school year starts Aug. 18, first-day jitters will take on a whole new meaning in Miami-Dade County.

That's because 11 new schools will open -- the most ever for the district. Also making their debut are two replacement high schools.

More than 11,000 students are expected to pour through the doors of the new facilities.

"The kids aren't the only ones who get excited or nervous," said Martha Montiel, principal of the new Hialeah Gardens Middle School. "We want to make sure everything runs as smoothly as possible."

The new schools, built at a total cost of \$565 million, are part of the Miami-Dade school district's \$3 billion push to ease overcrowding and meet state-mandated class-size reductions. They will create an additional 27,000 spaces for students, according to school officials.

Digital blackboards, eco-friendly buildings and wireless Internet access are just some of the features that students will find in the newly minted schools.

Sunny Isles Beach Community School, that city's first school, features seaside views and high-tech touches like a cyber cafe right off the lunchroom where students can work or surf the Internet after lunch. Teachers will wear microphones that will pipe their voices through ceiling-embedded speakers.

Bryna Berman, a teacher at the school, calls it "a very wise investment" not only for Sunny Isles Beach, but for the overcrowded schools from which students are transferring -- Ruth K. Broad/Bay Harbor Island and Virginia A. Boone/Highland Oaks elementary schools and Highland Oaks Middle.

"I think it's wonderful that teachers can really begin knowing their students much better now that we can have 18 to 22 students instead of 35," she said.

Most of the new schools feature futuristic touches and designs.

"I'm excited to be coming to a new school that has all this new technology," sixth-grader Conner Higgins, 11, said at a recent orientation at Aventura Waterways K-8 Center. "My old school was nice but not as nice as this place."

It's so nice, in fact, that Aventura Waterways recently won top billing in a national school design competition for eco-friendly features -- like floor-to-ceiling windows that allow sunlight to stream in, and electrical systems that cut down on excessive energy use.

The design for Aventura's new school was actually used at several other of the new K-8 centers throughout the county, a long stray from the "functional, boxy" look of schools erected in the 1970s, says Victor Alonso, design officer for the district.

"They were almost prisonlike in appearance," Alonso said of the older designs. ``The new school designs are more visually interesting to students and appealing to the community."

The new schools also aim to engage students by offering a variety of courses and academic concentrations, including leadership training and foreign-language studies.

Coconut Palm K-8 Academy, in South Miami-Dade, will focus on agriscience and medical biotechnology. Mandarin Lakes, also in South Miami-Dade, will have two academies: business and communications, and dual foreign-language -- Mandarin Chinese and Spanish.

In Miami's Buena Vista neighborhood, the Young Men's Preparatory Academy will become Miami-Dade's first all-boys public high school. As part of its Covey Leadership Academy, students will be required to study Sean Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. Covey's father, Stephen, is known for his bestselling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

The high cost of the school building boom is not lost on school officials, who started to plan the new schools in 2004 and are now grappling with budget cuts, declining enrollment and a hiring freeze.

Since 2004, the district has added 29 new school facilities. Eight more are scheduled to open by the 2009-10 school year. In total, the district will have added 37 schools once its five-year plan ends next year, Alonso said.

"This is kind of the peak," he said. ``After this, I don't know if we'll see as many schools going up at once."

Hampering plans for more schools are declining enrollment and a sluggish real-estate market.

Since the 2004-05 school year, the district has dropped in enrollment by 17,000 students, leading it to forgo or scale back about a half-dozen projects originally slated for next year, Alonso said.

"We've pulled back noticeably from those areas that were expected to grow the most," Alonso said. ``For example, most of the growth has leveled off in South Dade, mainly because of the housing crunch, so those are all factors we take into consideration."