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Sunny Isles Beach's first K-8 school built for 1,600 students

BY LISA BOLIVAR

In an historic moment for Sunny Isles Beach, the city's first school opens to more than 1,000 elementary students next week.

Sunny Isles Beach Community School will ultimately have about 1,600 K-8 students in its \$33 million facility at Northeast 183rd Street and Atlantic Boulevard.

The school is across the street from the city's community center, which it will use for physical education classes, gifted programs and events. Local residents also will be able to use computer facilities at the school, said Principal Annette Weissman.

The four-story school sits between the Atlantic Ocean and the Intracoastal, both visible from the upper floors, music suite and cafeteria patio.

"We are on just two acres of land, so we had to go up instead of spreading out like other schools," Weissman said.

Two other new schools, Aventura Waterways K-8 Center at 21101 NE 26th Ave., and Arch Creek Elementary at 700 NE 137th St. in North Miami, are opening nearby. In all, 11 new schools are opening in Miami-Dade County.

Sunny Isles Beach Community will relieve overcrowding at nearby Ruth K. Broad/Bay Harbor Island and Virginia A. Boone/Highland Oaks Elementary schools, and Highland Oaks Middle. Students who attended Broad, Highland Oaks or Ojus Elementaries automatically will be transferred to Sunny Isles. Students from Golden Beach and North Miami Beach's Eastern Shores subdivision also will go to Sunny Isles.

Transfers from outside the area will be accepted until Sunny Isles Beach Community reaches capacity. Each classroom will cap its student count at 18 in K-3, and 20 for the rest, as mandated by law.

Weissman, former principal at Ojus Elementary, will lead the new school, bringing with her longtime supporters -- both teachers and parents -- who have followed her from school to school.

"I followed her from Fienberg-Fisher Elementary, to Ojus and now here," said Bryna Berman, who has been teaching for 25 years and said she admires Weissman's vision and compassion.

Weissman's passion will be the school's focus: math, science and technology.

The school is high-tech, offering two computer labs and interactive, digital whiteboard technology in all classrooms. It has a career lab and a cyber cafe right off the lunchroom, where students can go to work or surf after lunch. Teachers will wear microphones that will pipe their voices through ceiling-embedded speakers.

Berman said opening the school is "a very wise investment" not only for Sunny Isles Beach, but for the overcrowded schools from which students are transferring.

"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.

Weissman's reputation is even helping pull students in from private schools. Samuel Willinger, 9, and his sister Mollie, 6, of Golden Beach are leaving behind a Jewish education at Jacobson Sinai Academy to transfer to Sunny Isles Beach.

"When you send your kids to school, you want the very, very best for them, you want them to be able to achieve to their greatest potential because they are like your little treasures," said their mother, Gloria Willinger. "When I met Dr. Weissman, I said, 'This is the woman who can make this happen for me.' "

Willinger, who is an accountant, is so confident that Sunny Isles Beach Community School will succeed, she has joined the PTA and become its treasurer.

PTA President Natalie Daly -- whose son, Tamim, 10, is enrolled -- is throwing herself into supporting the school.

"To say I am excited is an understatement," said Daly, who lives in Sunny Isles Beach. "I am looking forward to having our own school in our community.

"We've been working all summer long, and the last three months we have had several fundraising events, because it is our job as the PTA to assist the principal and the teachers and be a resource to them, whether it's financial or giving them an extra hand."

As Sunny Isles and Aventura Waterways open their doors, relieving area school class sizes, District 3 Miami-Dade School Board member Martin Karp said his focus will shift from the overcrowding issue.

"Those schools will no longer face the overcrowding they once faced, and that is significant because that will allow the students to be in a safer environment," Karp said, adding that he will encourage local businesses to invest in education.

Parents and principals are also looking forward to easing overcrowding in North Miami. The new Arch Creek Elementary will relieve three area schools, two of which have been using portable classrooms. About 700 students from nearby Biscayne Elementary, Linda Lentin K-8 Center and North Miami Elementary will attend the new school, which shares common areas with a new North Miami Middle.

"This is very exciting for the community," said Arch Creek's principal and former North Miami Elementary principal Marie A. Bazile.

The middle school will offer three magnet programs: the museum magnet, International Baccalaureate program and a communications program.

Miami Herald staff reporter Carli Teproff contributed to this report.