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Aventura's new school has a marine focus

BY ERNESTO ALVAREZ

Connor Higgins, 11, always has been fascinated by lobsters, sharks, dolphins and other marine life. He's already decided he wants to be a marine biologist. Entering the sixth grade next week, Connor has found the perfect fit: the new Aventura Waterways K-8 Center.

Opening Aug. 18 to more than 1,100 students, Aventura Waterways will feature a rigorous academic curriculum with a maritime focus.

Principal Luis Bello, who is transferring from the same job at Biscayne Elementary, said he's eager to see how kids respond to the marine program.

"Each year students will explore different aspects of marine life," Bello said. "For instance, first-graders will focus on estuaries and bays, third-graders on coral reefs, seventh-graders on marine mammals, eighth-graders on humans' effect on ocean resources."

Students will be required to complete individual projects pertaining to their grade's concentration every year.

Given Miami's location, the marine theme is ideal.

"I feel that since we live in Florida and are surrounded by water, the theme will be informative and exciting for the students," said Lori Kaplan, who will be a first grade gifted teacher.

Aventura Waterways, 21101 NE 26th Ave., is one of two new K-8 schools opening in the area; the other is Sunny Isles Beach Community School. Aventura will alleviate overcrowding at nearby Virginia A. Boone/Highland Oaks, Madie Ives and Ojus Elementaries, as well as Highland Oaks Middle. In all, 11 new schools are opening in Miami-Dade County.

Kaplan faced overcrowding at her previous school, Greynolds Park Elementary. "We had to combine some classes, and each grade level had at least two teachers who team-taught in one room," she said.

Another feature of the new Aventura Waterways: its "green" design.

The \$35 million school consists of five multistory buildings. The school won the Education Design Showcase 2008 annual award in the June issue of School Planning & Management, a national publication that focuses on best practices in school facilities planning and design.

"The design uses green design standards, such as efficient mechanical/electrical systems and lightshelves for natural lighting and indirect lighting, to reduce operational expenses, preserve the environment and improve student performance, comfort and safety," said Martin Karp, whose District 3 Miami-Dade School Board seat covers the area, in an e-mail.

Assistant Principal Maria Costa said she is "very excited to be a part of such a wonderful opportunity

for the students."

Connor, the aspiring marine biologist, was among a group of students and parents who attended an Aug. 1 orientation at the new school. His mother, Bridget, who works in Aventura Mall, said Connor's younger brother will enroll next year for kindergarten.

Connor had attended Ojus Elementary since kindergarten.

"I'm excited to be coming to a new school that has all this cool technology," he said at the orientation. "My old school was nice, but not as nice as this place."

Technology-wise, Aventura Waterways has three computer laboratories, each with 25 MacIntosh computers and two fully-equipped science labs. Classrooms also have 77-inch interactive whiteboards known as Smartboards, that serve as a combination digital blackboard, computer screen and television screen.

Also at the orientation were Debbie Solti and her son Daniel, an incoming sixth-grader who is transferring from elementary school in Lenox, Mass.

"I'm very happy with what I've seen; it's big and beautiful," he said, referring to the spacious new campus. "I just got here and it already feels like home. Now I just want to meet my new friends."

Initially, the school will offer an intramural sports program, with future plans to include out-of-school competition, Bello said.

Recreational activities also will be offered at the school's after-care enrichment program, headed by PTSA vice president Keren Manor, whose son Nathaniel is entering the third grade at Aventura Waterways.

The school also will feature an optional dual language program starting in kindergarten. Its objective is to have participants become fully fluent in Spanish by the end of eighth grade.