

New Schoolhouse Rocks

By Jeffrey S. Solocek

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LAND O'LAKES — Tristyn Pace was astonished to see her brand new school for the first time.

"It's way different," the third-grader said, comparing Connerton Elementary to Sanders Memorial Elementary, where she and her sister attended last year. "The stuff is way nicer. And bigger."

Connerton Elementary stands just a 10-minute drive from Sanders, on a lonely stretch of Connerton Boulevard in an unfinished section of the giant planned subdivision. But the two schools seemed eons apart to the students, parents and teachers who visited for a recent tour.

"You don't have to run in the rain from the classrooms to the offices," said Caroline Pace, Tristyn's mom, referring to the more hodgepodge layout of Sanders, which usually flooded during rainstorms.

"The technology itself is going to be amazing," said Angie Seier, a school advisory council member whose son, Tyler, is in fifth grade. "It's going to be a whole different world for them."

Indeed, principal Anna Falcone said, even though the school will house only students from Sanders, which is slated for demolition in the fall, it is a different place that will have its own traditions and its own way of doing things.

"It is a new school," Falcone said. "It is not Sanders at Connerton."

Among the notable changes:

- Only about half the teaching staff transferred to Connerton, despite initial plans to move teachers and students together. When the district decided to shut down Sanders for an indefinite period, that kicked in a contract provision requiring all staff members to reapply for jobs in the district.
- Classrooms are set up to be more conducive for pods of classes. And although they're set up in the traditional K-1, 2-3 and 4-5 splits, teams are established so students remain together through fifth-grade with the same set of teachers.

- Technology is much more advanced at Connerton, which has rolling laptop laps filled with new MacBooks, classroom interactive white boards and more of the latest equipment, compared to Sanders' single computer lab that featured decade-old computers.

"Everything is huge!" exclaimed Ashtyn Pace, Tristyn's sister, who will begin fourth grade in the fall.

"Isn't it nice?" replied student achievement coach Dorothy Forry, who led the tour. "Going from Sanders, we loved Sanders, but, buh-bye. This is new, and it doesn't smell like tennis shoes or anything."

Forry praised Falcone and the district for making the transition between schools comfortable rather than anxiety-filled.

"We're starting new. It couldn't have happened at a better time," she said. "It's exciting."

The school's mascot is the Champion, and its symbol the torch of knowledge. When it opens, it will be near capacity with an expected 725 students.

Sanders will remain closed, with no immediate plans to rebuild it. District officials said they will track enrollment trends and prepare for new construction only when the student population warrants the expense.

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