

FCS elementary school buildings ready for start of new school year

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FREMONT - For Kerry Wendling, the COVID-19 pandemic's abrupt March disruption of in-person classes and her adjustment on the fly to an online-only schedule made it seem like the hectic, unpredictable 2019-20 school year never really ended.

"It was hard to take the summer and rejuvenate," Wendling, a first-grade teacher at Fremont's Otis Elementary School, acknowledged Tuesday as she sat at her desk.

School starts Tuesday for Wendling and the rest of FCS' teachers, students and staff.

It should be a time for celebration, with FCS opening four new elementary schools this week, including the Otis building where Wendling works.



The lingering pandemic has put a damper on the Fremont district's new buildings and its overall reopening, with about one-third of the district's students opting for online learning this semester and the rest only able to attend in-person classes twice a week.

There were moments this year where Superintendent Jon Detwiler wondered whether the district's new Atkinson, Croghan, Lutz and Otis elementary school buildings would open on time for the 2020-21 school year.

COVID-19-related supply chain delays and material shortages caused some building delays and there are still punch-list items, such as landscaping, road signs and playground equipment, that must be completed at all four sites.

"Considering we built during a pandemic, we're very thankful to be starting school on time," Detwiler said.

Work on buildings started in 2019

Voters in 2017 approved a \$58.6 million levy to construct four new elementary buildings and a new Ross High School as part of a facilities plan to upgrade building quality and technologies.

The Fremont City Schools board approved a guaranteed maximum project cost of more than \$49.7 million for its four new elementary schools in February 2019.

Atkinson's GMP came to a little more than \$12 million and slightly higher than the other three elementary school buildings, which had building costs in the \$11.6 million to \$11.7 million range.



District officials had an official groundbreaking ceremony in May 2019 at Don Paul

Stadium for all four school sites. Students filled the bleachers and watched district

leaders and project officials shovel ceremonial dirt and talk about the new buildings'

impact on Fremont's future.

Actual work at each site began earlier in 2019.

Each building's footprint is the same, Detwiler said, with all four buildings sharing the same square footage and number of classrooms.

Wendling has been an elementary school teacher for 25 years within the district, with stints at Atkinson, Hayes and Washington.

It will be her first year at Otis.

Her room is ready, with all of her students' desks and chairs set up and a wooden sign on the wall, decorated with owls, that reads "Mrs. Wendling's Classroom: Live, Laugh, Learn."

She met most of her students at an open house Monday.

The new school's air conditioning is heaven, she said.

Half of her class starts Tuesday and Wendling is excited to see all of her students, even if it's only for a couple days a week.

Wendling said she feeds off of her students and their innocence, which helps her briefly forget about some of the bigger problems facing the world right now.

What's inside the new FCS buildings



Inside the Otis building, the first people visitors will see are secretaries Gina Reed and Billi Pickerel.

Pickerel has been at Otis for 20 years, while Reed worked at Hayes Elementary for 28 years before switching over this year.

Tuesday, the two were still busy getting the school's reception office ready for the first day of school.

In addition to air conditioning, Reed mentioned another first for her.

"We have windows. I've never had windows," Reed said.

To enter Otis and the other buildings, visitors will need to be buzzed through three locked doors.



Detwiler said each building will have a controlled security system for entry, with monitors in the reception area.

Students in grades 3-5 will be on the second floor, with color coding in the hallways directing students to their designated rooms.

The school's guidance counselor's office will be on the second floor, Detwiler said.

Fremont City Schools has put in a couple of safety features for the Fremont Police Department, he said.

Svetlana Tarnavsky, an art teacher at Otis and Atkinson Elementary Schools, said her classroom is twice the size of the one she taught in last year.

"And I like having three sinks," Tarnavsky said.

With the extra space, Tarnavsky said it is also easier to spread the classroom's tables apart, something that's taken on greater importance this year with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sandusky County was yellow, or a Level 1, Friday on the Ohio Department of Health's state advisory system.

Detwiler said each new building has a COVID-19 quarantine plan in place.

At a nurse's station, students will get a pre-assessment to determine if they have COVID-19 symptoms and would be moved first to a conference room, then leave via a side door if they are believed to be positive.

As of Tuesday, Detwiler said the district had dealt with a couple of precautionary quarantine situations but had not recorded any positive COVID-19 tests for teachers, students or staff so far.

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