

This is a printer-friendly version. The navigation and other unnecessary elements have been removed.



Kindergarten teacher Catherine Holmes, left, introduces her charges to the wonders of the media center's projection screen during a tour of the school on the first day.

MIGUEL VASCONCELLOS, IRVINE WORLD NEWS

[MORE PHOTOS](#)

Tuesday, October 16, 2007

Irvine school opens to oohs and aahs

The newest school has about 430 students; replaces El Camino Real

By CATHY TRAN

IRVINE WORLD NEWS

[Comments 1](#) | [Recommend 13](#)

The melody to "You're a Grand Old Flag" blasted out of the speakers on the blacktop: The music-maker was school Superintendent Gwen Gross' fingers fluttering across a keyboard. Students trickled out onto the blacktop Tuesday morning for Woodbury Elementary School's grand opening, which drew parents, community neighbors and council members Christina Shea and Steven Choi.

"We're so excited," co-principal Lauren Sepelis told the crowd. "It just wasn't a school without kids yet."

The 62,451-square-foot school on Great Lawn is filled with about 430 students, most of whom moved over from 35-year-old El Camino Real Elementary School which closed in September.

Architect Roger Clarke said he designed the school to fit with the Romanesque style and arches that characterize Woodbury village. The interior of the school, he said, was constructed with the district's goal of implementing technology in the classrooms in mind. The "star plan," Clarke said, has all the classroom hallway wings face into the central media hub equipped with computers and an LCD projector. Sepelis said that Woodbury Elementary has about 200 computers, almost double the amount at the old school.

"It's nice to have a school planned with the population in mind," said My-Diem Tong, mother of Jude, a kindergarten student at the school. "They have a chance to plan it out for what they need."

Sepelis said the school is built to hold up to 900 students to accommodate growth. Within a few blocks are signs for six new Woodbury neighborhoods with homes for sale.

On Tuesday morning, students' sleepy eyes widened as they oohed and aahed over the rows of new black Dell computers, cushioned chairs in the media center, and shiny classroom desks. Teachers slid aside their white boards to show off the ample storage space behind. And they have more to look forward to: the rubber surfaces for the playgrounds are planned to be completed next week and the grass field should be ready at the beginning of November.

Marcella Belmes, 10, said she loved the wall of windows — classroom windows were rare at El Camino.

Belmes said when she has trouble focusing, she can look out and "let (her) imagination fly out the window for just a few minutes" and then get back to class.

The fifth grader had been at El Camino since kindergarten and as "awesome" as the new school is, she said she does miss her old school.

"I tell my mom to go another way (to not pass it)," Belmes said. "I almost started crying." Her classmate, Rebecca Jordan, 11, agreed that it is sad to leave their old school, with memories and the familiarities of knowing exactly how to get around.

The school district has yet to decide what to do with the building and land at the El Camino campus, but will hold a meeting next month to discuss options for that school along with three other ones in the district that have also closed, according to spokesman Ian Hanigan.

Belmes had some ideas to share with the folks in charge.

"It should stay that way, like a monument," Belmes said. "They should give tours of it so it'd make money for more supplies too."

Contact the writer: ctran@ocregister.com or 949-553-2959