

Heartland Ranch Elementary School opens on time, under budget

By BRIAN AHNMARK
Editor

The 2007-08 academic year is rapidly approaching, so it's high time to break out the back-to-school checklist. Let's see... buy supplies? Check. New backpack? Check. Pencils sharpened? Check. Open Heartland Ranch Elementary School on time and under budget?

Check.

Community members toured the Coolidge Unified School District's newest K-8 facility during a grand opening ceremony on Thursday, Aug. 2. The 75,000-square-foot school has the capacity for roughly 850 students.

In April 2006, the school was officially approved for funding by the Arizona State Facilities Board, the entity responsible for school construction projects. Then entitled Coolidge K-8 No. 3, the school was slated for \$8.7 million in funding. The Coolidge district held a groundbreaking ceremony on Dec. 11, and an unusually smooth and efficient construction phase followed. Key players included contractor D.L. Withers and HDA Architects, both longtime partners of the district.

Dr. Richard Rundhaug, CUSD assistant superintendent, explained that an alternative procurement process known as "construction manager at-risk" acted as the catalyst that kept the project ahead of schedule.

"As you go through the permitting process, if different entities such as the city find deficiencies, it becomes the construction manager's responsibility to fix the design elements that need fixing," he said. Through this arrangement, the district was still responsible for "change orders" — deciding to add a wall in a room, for example.

"This project is probably the ideal in terms of construction manager at-risk projects coming together," Rundhaug said. "In my opinion, it's probably better than any project in the state. Construction came together quickly and under budget."

Rundhaug said the district set aside roughly \$1 million from the Nov. 2005 Class B bond monies to cover the cost of amenities not funded by SFB, such as carpeting.

"This process has been so rewarding," Rundhaug said. "The contractor, the architect and the school district really came together in a cooperative effort."

Districts across the state have struggled to keep pace with rapid residential growth. The Coolidge Unified School District is no exception, although the successful completion of Heartland Ranch Elementary School proves that the district is getting ahead of the curve. As a point of comparison, Mountain Vista Elementary School — the district's previous new addition — opened about three months late due to a litany of delays. The scheduled Aug. 2006 opening quickly turned into late October, and it was early November before all K-8 students were on site and in classrooms.

The delay caused a chain reaction of other challenges. Since Mountain Vista is located in the burgeoning northern section of the Coolidge district, all students in that area were forced to crowd into San Tan Heights Elementary School for the first three months of the 2006-07 academic year. More than 1,500 youngsters filled the classrooms in a facility designed for a capacity of 1,200 students.



Staff photo by Kristi Freeder

Second-grader Madlyn Weaver, right, looks over a Heartland Ranch Elementary School map with teacher Amy Jensen.

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There will be no such trouble at Heartland Ranch, located within Coolidge city limits at 1600 W. Caroline Street. Jessie Arroyos joins CUSD as the principal of the new school, and she says the site is ready for the first day of classes on Aug. 6.

"We have all of our classroom teachers, all rosters and all schedules," she said. "We're ready for day one."

Arroyos said the staff had a goal of sorting and distributing all textbooks to teachers before classes begin. All basic supplies were in place, and the phones were up and running — with the new "424" prefix, a sign of growth in Coolidge.

Speaking of growth, Arroyos estimated that 50 new students enrolled last week. She projected a total student body of about 625 youths, although it will take a couple of weeks for the staff to sort through all of the students moving in and out of the school to determine an official enrollment number.

Those students will be guided by roughly 50 staff members, including 31 teachers.

"We're lucky we got several teachers from McCray," Arroyos said. "It will help to have some experience." Other than those "six or seven" educators, the rest of the teaching staff is brand new to Coolidge.



Staff photo by Kristi Frazier

Representatives of the Coolidge Unified School District, the governing board, D.L. Withers, and the Heartland Ranch student body helped cut the ribbon to officially open the new school.

Arroyos said several teachers moved into the city this summer.

"The teachers and staff members

are all really excited, especially since we're opening a new school," she

said. "We're a little nervous, too!"

Heartland Ranch Elementary School can be reached at (520) 424-2100.