

Overcrowded schools will shift students to Northgate Elementary

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By KEVIN PARKS, ThisWeek Community News

In December 1997, a 50-member steering committee recommended to the Columbus school board that among other buildings, Northgate Elementary School on Sharon Woods Boulevard be reopened.

That will sort of come about with the start of the 2016-17 school year.

Fourth- and fifth-graders from overcrowded Alpine and Avalon elementary schools will be shifted to Northgate -- currently the temporary home for the Ecole Kenwood French immersion school -- in the fall.

Parents, faculty and staff members were informed of the decision last week by Columbus City Schools officials.

Some of the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers from Alpine and Avalon were able to take a tour of the building where they will be working, according to Scott Varner, director of strategic communication for the district.

"I think there are some ideas already for how they want to use that building," he said.

For Leila Ba, founder of the nonprofit Countdown to Beechcroft organization that seeks to garner support for the feeder programs for the high school her children will eventually attend, it was decidedly welcome news. She has long complained about overcrowding in the local neighborhood schools.

“I feel like we’re going in the right direction,” Ba said. “I’m very excited about it. The community is very excited about it.

“This was a good first step. That was my goal for the year.”

Northland Community Council President Emmanuel V. Remy was also encouraged by the announcement, which he said he had been briefed on in advance.

“I think it’s phenomenal,” Remy said. “We’ve known for a long time that those buildings were overcrowded. The parents were looking for relief. I think the reaction has been positive, from parents to teachers to the public.”

Northgate Elementary, after it was closed decades ago, served as office space for the administration up until the current school year, when repairs and upgrades were made so that it could serve as swing space for Ecole Kenwood, Varner said.

A new \$15.4 million building for the French immersion program is under construction on Shattuck Avenue on the Northwest Side.

The work to turn Northgate Elementary back into a school cost about \$1 million, Varner said.

“Here we have this building with about \$1 million in upgrades that have been made to it, and it will soon be empty,” he added.

Moving the fourth- and fifth-grade students to Sharon Woods Boulevard will allow district officials to remove all the modular buildings at the two campuses, except for one at Alpine that’s attached to the structure, Varner said.

“We won’t need them. That allows students to be in the main building,” he said

According to Ba, most elementary schools in the district have about 400 students, but Avalon’s population at times was almost 700 and Alpine has more than 500.

Avalon Elementary had to divide lunch over four periods because of the number of students there, Varner said, while Alpine Elementary needed three lunch periods.

“We do know (for) both of those buildings, the strain, the growth is now,” he said. “We wanted to do something now as opposed to wait three, five years, however long the facilities planning process would put a new building in that area.

“We heard from parents, from teachers, from staff at both of those buildings about that strain, about the number of students there,” Varner said. “The challenges were well known, and suddenly, here was this great opportunity that allows us to address those challenges.”