

Fresno Unified's next high school aims at building young entrepreneurs

By Hannah Furfaro



A new high entrepreneurial high school is being built on the old DeWolf Continuation High campus in central Fresno. HANNAH FURFARO — The Fresno Bee

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Giant red steel beams planted in dirt are all that hint at the high school being constructed in central Fresno near Ratcliffe Stadium.

Construction crews worked there in the gray afternoon light Tuesday, drilling and digging on the bottom floor of what will be a two-story entrepreneurial high school by August.

"I will be relieved to have it completed because the noise, the dust level, it never stops," said a neighborhood resident, who was outside doing yard work and has lived in the area since the early 1960s.

The man, who declined to give his name, remembers when the lot across the street was just dirt and trees. No stop signs dotted the corners of North Clark Street when he lived here as a kid, he said. Now,



generations of buildings have come and gone — the new school is rising where DeWolf Continuation once sat and Design Science High takes up the southern part of the block.

Formal plans for the \$12 million school, informally dubbed the “Clark Street School” until an official name is chosen, were unveiled at Wednesday’s Fresno Unified school board meeting. Funding for construction of the school — and demolition of DeWolf — was approved by the board last February, although at the time, the money was described as going toward a two-story classroom building, not a new school. Spokeswoman Micheline Golden said funding comes through a combination of Measure Q bond funds and state dollars.

The school will feature a special entrepreneurial project-based curriculum, in some ways similar to the Center for Advanced Research and Technology, where students will learn the basics of business, economics and computer programming.

The school will be anything but conventional — although students still will be expected to complete English, math, science and social studies courses, they will learn each subject through an entrepreneurial lens. Students also will be required to create their own startup businesses by the time they graduate.

Only incoming 10th-graders will be eligible to apply in its first year — about 150 students will initially be accepted. Grade 11 will be added in the 2016-17 school year; grade 12 will be added in the 2017-18 school year. Eventually, 400 students will attend school there. Ninth grade will not be offered.

At the board meeting, Brett Taylor, the new school’s principal and former principal at Duncan Polytechnical High, said students will be picked through a lottery if more than 150 apply. Students who submit applications by Feb. 27 will be given priority, he said.

Several trustees were gleeful to hear details about the school, which until Wednesday hadn’t been made public.

“I know our kids will just bust the roof off this new building,” trustee Valerie Davis said. “I almost wish I was in 10th grade again.”

Trustee Brooke Ashjian called the school a “tall order” but said the plans are impressive and could be a “real turning point for Fresno Unified.”

Others weren’t so sure, like trustee Carol Mills, who worried the program might be too limiting for students who enroll and then decide their interests lie elsewhere.

“Frankly I’m just not convinced an entire school should be one pathway,” she said, adding she worries the program may be redundant with similar programs, like Fresno High’s marketing academy.

Early plans show closer similarities to the type of project-based learning at CART. But Bethany Garoupa, dean of curriculum and instruction there, said in an interview Wednesday she doesn’t expect the new school will compete directly for students who might otherwise attend CART.

CART, a public research and technology school where students from both Fresno and Clovis unified districts come for half the school day, serves 11th- and 12th-graders. Garoupa said CART hasn’t formally partnered with the school, but said if asked, CART would be happy to offer advice on project-based learning.

Partnerships with local companies, like Geekwise Academy, and universities also are in the works.

Fresno State’s Lyles Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship will help the district develop an entrepreneurial curriculum, Timothy Stearns, executive director for the center, said in an interview. The center already has developed entrepreneurship classes at several Fresno Unified high schools and other districts across the central San Joaquin Valley, he said.

“I’ve been here for 20 years and my dream has always been to foster entrepreneurial education in the Valley,” he said “To now have a place where there’s going to be a high school and kids are going to be totally immersed, you can’t get any better than that.”

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