

Renovation Will Essentially Create New 5-story North Chicago Middle School
Chicago Tribune 11/06/2020

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Chicago Tribune

Construction is underway on a massive \$40 million renovation essentially creating a new five-story middle school in North Chicago, where students will walk across their grade-level family room to get from math to social studies rather than through a long hallway.

North Chicago School District 187's Neal Math & Science Academy will become a 21st-century schoolhouse, where each grade will have its own floor, known as a pod, for its core subjects thanks to a \$40 million gift from AbbVie.

With middle school sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students learning remotely until at least Jan. 8, Superintendent John Price said the construction is barely noticeable. However, by this spring the five-story structure will begin to rise next to the existing gym.

With the gym the only part of the existing building which will remain, though it will also be heavily renovated, Price said the rebuilt school will be ready when the 2022-2023 school year begins. Neal is the district's only middle school.

Price said the top three floors will be devoted to a single grade, each with classrooms surrounding a rectangle which will be the grade's family room. Teachers' offices will be in the central area, so students can easily have access when they need assistance.

"The entire grade will be together with their community in a large, wide open room in the middle surrounded by classrooms," Price said. "It is designed to be flexible. If a group of students need to finish a project, they can go out there and the teacher can see what they're doing."

In March, 2019, Claudia Carravetta, AbbVie's vice president of corporate responsibility and global philanthropy, said the project started when the North Chicago-based pharmaceutical company committed \$40 million to design and rebuild the district's only middle school.

"AbbVie has a long term commitment to support the North Chicago community, and help the people there," Carravetta said. "We are committed to the community we serve. This is part of our ongoing commitment to K-12 education, especially literacy and STEM."

Along with financial support, Carravetta said in the last six years AbbVie personnel have donated more than 80,000 hours volunteering to help the community in a variety of ways. It has been ongoing since the company's inception in 2013 when it split from Abbott.

In his 25-year career in education as a teacher and administrator, Price said he has never seen a corporate gift the size of the one AbbVie gave to make the new building possible.

"It's incredible," Price said. "This is a unique contribution which will serve North Chicago and the community for the next 50 to 60 years."

The 67-year old building has had water leaks, uneven heating and cooling, ongoing electrical issues and water-main breaks forcing periodic closures. Carravetta said the company recognized the strong need for the community's middle-schoolers.

Price said the first thing the district did in conjunction with AbbVie after the company committed to donating \$40 million was conduct a feasibility study to determine the best possible design for the school.

Representatives of the district, AbbVie and project developer IFF toured schools to determine the best model for the building. Carravetta said IFF is a mission-driven nonprofit community development financial institution that provides real estate and development-oriented services to other non-profit organizations. Price said the pod concept arose from the study.

"Kids' success is based on relationship-building and a sense of belonging," Price said. "We found the pod model would be the best way to achieve that. Kids like to be seen, and they will be able to be seen. They don't feel they can be seen in the (existing) building."

Price said the third floor will contain the sixth-grade pod, the seventh-graders will have theirs on the fourth floor with the eighth grade on the fifth. The top three floors with their pods are not the only innovations slated for the new building.

With the refurbished gym on the south end of the building, Price said the first floor of the north side will contain administrators' offices, a nurse's office and the cafeteria. It will be connected to the second floor by a presentation staircase which is a very wide bleacher looking structure where students can congregate and collaborate.

The second floor will contain common areas like the library, which Price said is called the media center. Along with the media center, there will be a STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) area.

When finished, Price said the renovated building will be 98,350 square feet with room to hold more than the current approximate enrollment of 575 students. The existing structure is around 86,000 square feet.

Along with the \$40 million donation from AbbVie, Price said the district will pay for some of the furniture and utilize a federal grant to install a wireless internet network.