



NEWS RELEASE

ORANGE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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New Magnolia School set national example for design for students with disabilities

ORANGE COUNTY - One of the most important things Orange County Public Schools can do for students with disabilities is to get them ready for independent living and work opportunities. The custom-designed Magnolia School, which officially opened this month, will be uniquely suited to that purpose and will serve as an example nationwide.

“We spent five years in planning,” said Leigh Austin, Director of Exceptional Student Education Transitions for OCPS, and included studying other schools nationwide that were designed for students with disabilities. “There’s really nothing like this. We really have raised the bar,” she said.

Magnolia had previously been operating out of a facility that opened in 1973 and was not originally designed as a school for students with disabilities. The new Magnolia includes a greenhouse, a mock

hotel room, a model apartment, a commercial laundry, a fully-equipped culinary kitchen, a school store and a print shop.

The school was paid for with taxpayer funds through the half-penny sales tax, and was championed by School Board Member Dr. Kathleen “Kat” Gordon. It is being built for \$47.6 million in a joint project that also involves relocating Cherokee and Gateway schools to a new joint facility on the Magnolia property.

In total, the 10 OCPS school construction projects completed in 2020 created more than 1,900 jobs and a local economic impact of \$292.2 M.

Austin said the new facilities for Magnolia’s Bridges program will allow students to take food from “farm to table.”

Young people will learn to grow herbs, fruits and vegetables in a state-of-the-art greenhouse, prep them, clean them, cook them to industry standards and serve them in a banquet setting. “The unemployment rate for adults with disabilities is very high. This farm-to-table program, along with Magnolia’s housekeeping program, is training Magnolia students with disabilities for employment,” Austin said, noting that there is an unmet need for labor in Orange County that people with disabilities can help fill.

The school, which serves students with physical, cognitive and other disabilities in grades 6 to 12 and beyond, was designed with calming colors. Each classroom includes a calming nook for students who need to refocus their attention and manage their behavior. One of the most fun places in the school is the Exploration Room, which is equipped with a variety of relaxing lighting sources, soothing sound sources, calming visual projections, touch stimulating tactile contraptions, and scent stations to inspire refocusing through sense of smell. The purpose of the room is to provide students with opportunities to decompress and open up receptive pathways to continue learning through a multi-sensory approach.

The half-court gym was designed with basketball hoops that can be lowered to wheelchair height, the cafeteria has an outdoor seating area and the stage is fully accessible.

Principal Latonia Green said this school means the world to her students and staff. “Our purpose here at Magnolia is to serve students with unique needs, challenging and complex needs. Our mission is for those students to be able to showcase their abilities,” Green said. “It means the best supplies and equipment and state-of-the-art facilities to support the learning of our students.”

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