

New school year in more ways than one

BACK TO SCHOOL

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Written by

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PRICE HILL — The region's largest district, Cincinnati Public Schools, welcomed back some 33,000 students Wednesday. The theme of the day: Lots of new stuff.

Oyler School students returned to a \$21 million renovated building in Lower Price Hill. It's among five new or



renovated buildings that greeted students in the region's largest district. The district is in the final stretch of a \$1.2 billion project to overhaul all its schools.

The new Oyler includes the only school-based eye clinic in the state, a health clinic, a day care center and a rooftop convening area for high school students.

"We have a lot of things going on," said Principal Craig Hockenberry.

New buildings are the biggest, most expensive change this year. But not the only one. Some students have new uniforms or new principals. About 3,500 CPS students rode to school in new buses

Oyler Principal Craig Hockenberry welcomes students to their newly renovated building on the first day of school Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2012 /The Enquirer/Jessica Brown

And once they get settled, many will be introduced to new curriculum. The district is rolling out portions of its new national "Common Core" curriculum standards, which will focus on project-based learning and in-depth lessons.

At Oyler, parents and kids started lining up at 7 a.m., 45 minutes before the first period started.

Juanita Schrode of Upper Price Hill waited with her son, Ted Drew, 12 who was clasping a red spiral notebook awaiting his first day of seventh grade.

She loves the new building. "It's got air conditioning and lights that just turn on by themselves when you go into the room!"

Oyler, a 626-student PreK-12 school, has won national accolades for its "wrap-around" approach to education, including the day care and eye care center.

It is a "Community Learning Center," something CPS has become famous for in education circles, which leverages partnerships with community groups to provide things like health care, tutoring and after school

activities for kids and families. The idea is to address the challenges low-income students face outside of the classroom to help improve their chances at academic success.

Oyler's student body is mostly Appalachian backgrounds and 85 percent are considered low-income. Before the school expanded to a K-12, almost all of students dropped out after the eighth grade.

Hockenberry meandered through the growing crowd on Hatmaker street. He shouted "hello" to returning students, gave a couple of high fives, and chatted through an open car window with a parent who was trying to figure out where to drop off a child. As the sun rose, he tried to to organize the excited chaos.

"OK, this is a brand new building," he yelled above the din then motioned his arms like an air traffic controller. "Kindergarten, first and second grade will walk straight in this door and into the auditorium. If you're in third, fourth, fifth or sixth, go in to the right."

Up on the rooftop gathering area, teacher Brian "Joe" Saylor welcomed students back. He's a third-generation Oyler graduate, who came back two years ago to teach.

He said the new building, with its community spaces and technology, is about more than just a building; it's about equality.

"Kids are blown away because they grow up in a situation where everywhere they look it seems like people have more than they have," he said. "And now they're going to come in here and they're going to feel like they're on equal footing, that they have the same opportunities and the same resources that other schools do. And that's great."

Over at the new Robert and Adele Schiff Early Learning Center, mom Tracy Stimetz was trying to get her sons Kory, 2 and George, 4, acquainted with the day care. Kory wearing a "Cars" backpack almost bigger than himself, clung to his mother, sobbing. But he brightened up as soon as he spied a rack of toy cars. He plucked up a yellow backhoe and ran off to play.

Stimetz, who also has a daughter in Oyler's kindergarten was thrilled to hear about the day care center. It will be a big help to working parents, like herself. It's open year-round. It already has a waiting list for infants.

"It's a positive for the whole neighborhood," she said.