

New Tech era dawns today

Freshmen will be school's only students this year, setting patterns, traditions

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Let there be light.

That not only applies to the basic educational mission but also the facility at Bloomington's New Tech High School. It opens for the first time this morning as the Monroe County Community School Corp. begins its 2008-09 school year.

New Tech is at 444 S. Patterson Drive, abutting Adams Street, in a renovated structure that formerly housed Rogers Building Supply.

The facility's outsized front facade still looks a bit ungainly. And the 95 freshmen expected to walk through the front doors today will first find themselves in an unremarkable hallway, bisected by pillars, adjacent to the school offices. But beyond that, the space literally opens up.

A huge skylight in the middle of the roof permits natural light to bathe the atrium, the open-air space stretching through the building's two floors around a central staircase. Classrooms are on both floors, with most of the classrooms in use this year on the second floor.

And in keeping with New Tech Foundation preferences that governed the creation of the school, all classrooms with walls bordering hallways and the central atrium are full of windows, allowing that natural light in.

"Functionally, this funnels light for the classrooms and, philosophically, it creates transparency — anybody coming along the hallway will be able to see our students and staff at work," New Tech principal Alan Veach said last week. "Our philosophy is that we're going to teach with projects and differentiate from a traditional classroom. We want visitors to our building to see that the moment they walk in.

"They'll be seeing kids working together in groups, teachers walking between the groups, 25 computers per classroom and all the rest."

California dreamin'

The project-based New Tech approach is new to Bloomington but was developed a dozen years ago in Napa, Calif. The concept is catching on nationwide, and Indiana is expected to soon surpass North Carolina as the state with the most New Tech schools.

The name aside, the concept is not new, nor does it involve what is commonly perceived as a "technical" education. Rather, it provides for a general curriculum conveyed through cutting-edge means. The student-to-computer ratio is one-to-one.

New Tech is a public MCCSC school, open to all students in the district. It can accept up to 100 students per year and, with its freshman class enrolled, will add another class each year until it attains full four-year status.

The curriculum will expand as the sophomore, junior and senior classes come into being, with now-empty classroom space coming online. Several subjects will be taught in co-curricular fashion, with teachers sharing classrooms.

Shared space, shared teaching

Social studies teacher Pam Gunkel, looking at the skylight outside the New Tech classroom she'll share with former Bloomington High School South colleague Drew Schrader, smiled Monday afternoon and said, "I had a classroom without windows for the past eight years at South. I feel like a mole coming out into the light."

Schrader, who will teach English in the co-curriculum, is a veteran of American studies team teaching at South with Carla Gardner, Gunkel noted. Team teaching and student teamwork are stressed.

"We'll be doing team building and a lot of collaborative activities this first week, break down some barriers between kids and help keep them enthused," Schrader said. "We've talked as a staff about establishing the school culture, about giving the kids a sense of belonging and a sense of really doing things a bit differently.

"We're treating it more like an employee orientation, as with starting a new job where you'll be speaking with the human resources people and others about what's expected and what their firm is all about."

Each of the students will hear from at least two outside speakers this week — including Indiana University men's basketball coach Tom Crean on Thursday — and then prepare presentations from those talks as a way to ease into the school's project-based approach. Schrader said the New Tech template called for delaying full-fledged projects a bit while the new students acclimate.

A family affair

The students will also get a chance to name the school, set some of the school rules, consider the school's dress code and select the school colors and mascot.

Courtney Sinclair, an eighth-grader at Batchelor Middle School last spring, favors perhaps navy and gold for a color combination and likes the ways New Tech will engage its new students.

"Rather than lecturing, teachers will be guiding us," Courtney said last week. "If we need help to get where we want to go, we can ask them. The key word is guiding. I liked that. I think the students will feel more in charge, more engaged, more adult.

"Everybody will be new to it. There will be no upper classes, and I like that. I like being part of the first class. Everybody will remember your class as a pacesetter. And it'll be like a family — maybe not quite that close, but very intimate, with all of us sharing experiences together."

Tracy Sinclair, Courtney's mother, also likes the school's enrollment numbers, its computer ratio, what she knows about project-based learning and what she's heard from the New Tech staff.

"Listening to Alan (Veach) and from the teachers, I could hear it from their hearts that this is something they really believe in," Sinclair said. "They'll have an opportunity to have a very closely knit staff and well-knit group of students. I think students know it's a great opportunity."

That seemed the case Monday afternoon when Brandon Jordan, another New Tech student arriving from Batchelor, stopped by for an impromptu visit at the school with his entire family.

As they walked into the atrium area, Olivia, Brandon's sister and a fifth-grader at Summit Elementary this fall, leaned over to whisper this in Brandon's ear: "Lucky!"

Tour by the board

Monroe County Community School Corp. board members took a tour last week of Bloomington's New Tech High School, in the renovated building that used to house Rogers Building Supply at Patterson Drive and Adams Street. Here are some of their comments:

JIM MUEHLING: "The program is a direct response to 'market need' for education. Students gain such valuable and practical experiences through their internships, collaborative classroom work and advanced curriculum. It will be exciting to see the results."

LOIS SABO-SKELTON: "New Tech represents the beginning of the 'tailoring' of our public school education to meet the needs of every child. ... (We) can now make the commitment to create programs that really do fit every child's needs."

JEANNINE BUTLER: "I was very impressed with the layout and the way that New Tech has taken shape. ... The classrooms are very open and also very approachable from hallways ... with the huge expanses of windows. It is my hope that this new school will provide yet another way of allowing students to learn in the way in which they learn best."

TERESA GROSSI: "The two aspects I like the most are the amount of light the building has, through the windows in all the rooms and the skylight, that give that sense of openness. And the windows into the classroom to see teaching and learning in action. You can see the potential of the building to foster a sense of community."

— SARAH MORIN

New Tech staff

Anne Burke: Biology, from Bloomington High School North

Loren Wood: Geometry, from Aurora Alternative High School

Drew Schrader: English, from Bloomington High School South

Pam Gunkel: Social studies, from Bloomington High School South

Joann Novak: Career and technical education, from the Hoosier Hills Career Center

Keri Gross: Counselor and health, from Bloomington High School North

Alan Veach: Principal, from Bloomington High School South

Room descriptions

FIRST FLOOR

OFFICES: The offices have space for the school secretary, the counselor and the principal. There will be a place for students who are sick or who need attention, a teacher work room and a staff restroom.

BUSINESS CLASSROOM (102): A double classroom, with simultaneous instruction in both careers and software, and with a student-run school store to provide some real-world business experience. Joann Novak will teach. The room will accommodate up to 50 students and two teachers. The student store, with school supplies and New Tech school items, will be next to the doors to the cafeteria.

DINING AREA: With a seating area for 138, the school will eventually schedule three or four lunch periods as New Tech's enrollment grows. This school year, the kitchen will accommodate cold food preparation, with warm food brought in from Bloomington High School South's kitchen. By year two, it will have its own full-service kitchen.

WEST WALL UTILITIES AREAS: Includes an office in room 123 for a computer technician.

SOUTH WALL ROOMS: Unfinished this year.

SECOND FLOOR

BIOLOGY CLASSROOM (202): Full laboratory with gas, water and electricity outlets at student stations. It features 25 laptop computers and connects to a science preparatory area, which provides space for supplies and storage. Biology will be taught by Anne Burke in an integrated curriculum with health studies, with health teacher Keri Gross coming in to work with the groups.

ENGLISH/SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM (212): A double classroom accommodating 50 students, two teachers and 50 computers, with completely integrated, cross-curricular instruction. Drew Schrader will teach English and Pam Gunkel will teach social studies.

GEOMETRY (210): A single classroom with 25 desktop computers, with teacher Loren Wood integrating the geometry curriculum with biology and health, and some all-school projects.

PRESENTATION ROOM (216): Where students will present their projects to panels of experts in a professional setting. Will feature a small video-editing component.

FUTURE CHEMISTRY CLASSROOM (204): Unfinished.

FUTURE PHYSICS CLASSROOM (218): Unfinished.

FUTURE DOUBLE-CLASSROOMS (214 and 215): Unfinished.

What is New Tech?

A school model that originated during the 1990s in Napa, Calif., home of the nonprofit New Tech Foundation. The school caps student enrollment at 100 per grade for the four grades of high school and has a one-to-one student-to-computer ratio. It embraces project-based learning and teaches students skills that 21st-century businesses seek, such as critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal communication and literacy skills.

According to its Web site, here are some quick facts regarding the school:

- Rigorous and relevant academic curriculum with a project-based learning focus.
- Students will earn an Indiana Core 40 Diploma with the option to earn an Academic Honors Diploma.
- Strong postsecondary focus through IU, Ivy Tech or apprenticeship programs.
- Opportunities for extracurricular activities (sports, music, clubs) through New Tech or home high school.
- 12 hours of college credit at graduation.
- Integrated internship and service learning opportunities.
- Suited to a wide range of ability levels, the focus is on how we teach and learn.

**Alan Veach, principal of MCCSC's New Tech High School, gives a tour of the school Monday as remodeling work continues while today's opening approaches.
Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times**



**Principal Alan Veach, center, meets incoming freshman Brandon Jordan, left, and his family at Bloomington New Tech School.
Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times**



New Tech High School

