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East
County

LEMON GROVE SCHOOL BEGINS REMODELING

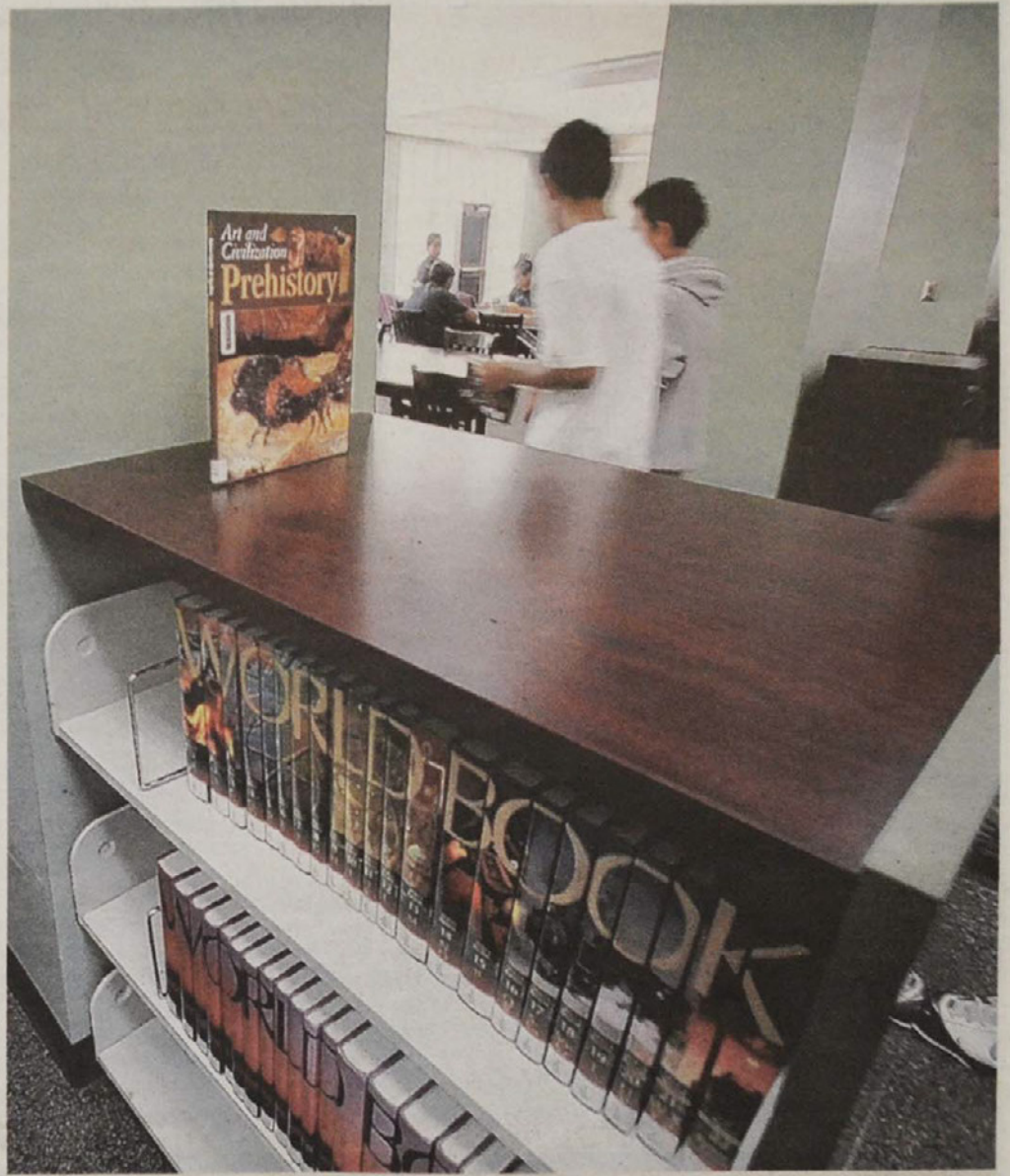
Plans call for campus to reopen as science and tech magnet in 2012

PG. 4



National champ water polo players have a long history together

PG. 15



PEGGY PEATTIE • U-T

A school comes back

Eight-year project transforms Cajon Valley Middle School

PG. 3

FROM SORRY SHAPE TO NEIGHBORHOOD JEWEL

Four construction stages reinvigorate middle school

CAROLINE DIPPING • U-T

EL CAJON

Seventh grader Keeley McDermott loves everything about the rebuilt Cajon Valley Middle School that she and her classmates moved into at the beginning of the school year. She loves the iPad 2 tablet computers in the classrooms, the spanking new library, and "Fun Fridays" on the new quad where she and the other students sometimes get to throw water balloons at the principal.

"It's so clean and there is so much space," Keeley said during a recent open house and ceremony to dedicate the El Cajon school's transformation from inner city eyesore to urban gem. Pride mixed with enthusiasm rang in her voice as she led invited guests on tours of the campus.

The celebration, which was attended by school district officials, local law enforcement, community members and students, was eight long years in the making. Yet, the \$15 million project, by being done in four well choreographed phases, still enabled school staff to conduct business as usual during construction.

Built in 1953, Cajon Valley Middle School was in sorry shape in 2000 when local voters approved Proposition X to fund the first three phases of construction. City of El Cajon redevelopment money and matching dollars from the state also helped defray the cost of the initial stages. (In 2008, Proposition D was passed, providing funding for the fourth and final building, a two-story classroom/multi-



At Cajon Valley Middle School, students and staff are celebrating the completion of an eight-year face-lift. PEGGY PEATTIE • U-T

purpose structure.)

Construction began in 2003 with the blueprint designed by Vista-based Sprotte+Watson Architecture & Planning.

The single-story campus was a crazy quilt of disjointed wings of classrooms, free-standing boys and girls locker rooms, antiquated plumbing and electrical systems, exposed rooftop HVAC equipment and acres of rusted chain link. There was no library, just a drab room with some books.

Worst of all, much of the student body and teachers had to be housed in 30 cramped, relocatable buildings.

"As time passed, the portable classrooms were overcrowded, and buildings

were becoming more and more difficult and costly to maintain," said Sharon Dobbins, director of long-range planning for the Cajon Valley Union School District, which owns the 20-acre property. "Graffiti and discipline were problems as kids were taking less pride in their school back then.

"The school just really needed a face lift," she said.

First erected was the new gym and multipurpose building designed for joint use with the city of El Cajon Parks and Recreation Department. With the first phase, strong ties to the community were created in an area brimming with blocks of apartments and crime.

"This changed the com-

munity," said David Dudley, president of West Coast Air Conditioning Co. in El Cajon, which worked on the renovation. "This was a beat-up area of town. This project is a testament to the vision of the school district."

Learning environments were redefined. Clerestories and light shelves in classrooms and labs optimize day light and enhance thermal and acoustic comfort. Classrooms, science and computer labs have wireless technology access, hardwire computer drops and ultra short throw projectors.

Two-story classroom buildings — including the first Collaborative for High Performance Schools-certified building in San Diego County — reduced the cam-

pus footprint. Courtyards, queen palms and oak trees provide shade.

The circular campus commons serves as a location for graduation ceremonies and other activities. Food services and the large lunch court complement the space's utility.

"It makes this campus so much more collegiate," architect Patty Sprotte said of the area. "And it is easier to supervise the students. Before, there were so many little nooks and crannies, there was no way you could keep track of everybody."

The redevelopment also reoriented the campus entry to the south, which created a new, income-producing parcel on the west where the original school was located. With the new

entry facing Park Street, it is quieter and safer for pedestrians and vehicular school traffic.

"Conflicts and discipline issues have been replaced by school pride," Principal Don Hohimer said. Enrollment is up, too, he said.

"You really do notice that the kids seem so at ease and happy to be there," Dobbins said. "You didn't get that feeling so much several years ago."

"I think in a year it will still be that way. The kids, teachers, staff, everyone has pride in it and wants to maintain it well. Even at night, going by there, it just has so much of a better feeling."

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