

Big new high school in Prosper builds small-town pride

09:55 AM CDT on Monday, August 31, 2009

By JESSICA MEYERS / The Dallas Morning News
jmeyers@dallasnews.com

Coleman Street heads north out of tiny Prosper past porches and hayfields until it passes a column-studded brick edifice that seems to span the horizon.

Welcome to the modern American high school, Texas style. Prosper High School is a \$113.5 million, 590,000-square-foot behemoth, complete with a medical tech lab, a restaurant-worthy kitchen, a greenhouse, a broadcast studio and, of course, an indoor football practice facility. All this in a still-sleepy town of just 7,000 people.

Also Online

[Download: School's location](#)

[Blog: The Education Front](#)

[More news about Prosper](#)

The school opened last week at half its capacity, but district officials say it will soon fill up as families push north from crowded suburbs like Frisco and McKinney.

So like some of the area's new schools, it's a symbol of growth's march, but also a community's search for identity and even Texas pride.

"This is more than bricks and mortar," said Drew Watkins, Prosper ISD's superintendent. "This is a community facility. This is what the community wanted. And when they say best, they mean best, not just pretty good."

This school doesn't have a gym. It has three. One is an arena. The auditorium seats nearly 1,000 people and will be the town's only theater.

Every classroom has four computers and an interactive white board that teachers use to project and manipulate images from their computers. Flat-screen televisions flash announcements throughout the day.

And while some districts create separate centers for career-focused programs, Prosper has fit them all in one building. And it has added a garage for auto mechanics in its wing dedicated to career and technical education.

The building already adorned with "State Champions," thanks to the football team, houses the indoor multipurpose field and a weight room that rivals private gyms.

The lecture hall and airy hallways give the school a collegiate feel, which Watkins said is intentional.

"Most of our parents are college educated and want their kids to have that experience," he said. "We want them to have a competitive edge, to think beyond Collin County – nationally and internationally."

There is a competitive edge as well for big, new schools when it comes to attracting good teachers.

Watkins said, "Teachers want to teach in a place like this."

'Community pride'

North Texas has built a slew of new high schools in recent years, though few match Prosper's scope.

Northwest ISD just opened a 504,000-square-foot high school in Trophy Club that cost \$96 million. McKinney Boyd High School finished the final phase of its 530,680-square-foot building last year. It cost \$80 million, not including technology and furniture. Sunnyvale High School opened this year at \$26 million for 110,000 square feet, making it even more expensive than Prosper based on cost per square foot.

Taxpayers have agreed to pay those bills with little fuss, especially in Prosper's case. The district passed a \$710 million school construction bond package two years ago by an 80 percent majority.

"There's a certain level of pride, a level of priority given to educating students," said Tony Elenburg, the pastor of Lighthouse Christian Fellowship in Prosper. "I've lived in a lot of different places and I'd say this is unique to Texas. It comes back to community pride."

Americans have long considered schools a community focus, said Gene Preuss, an assistant professor of history at the University of Houston-Downtown who published a book on the history of Texas education reform this year.

He pointed out that Texas stayed rural after World War II, "so the school remained a community center longer in Texans' collective memory."

The state's education funding speaks to that mentality. Local taxes pay for 44 percent of school finances nationally, but they pay for more than half of school funds in Texas.

This also means wealthier areas can afford better schools, Preuss said. So it's not surprising to see North Texas finance bigger and better schools, he said.

"School districts in areas that are experiencing greater growth can more easily afford to build facilities with bigger footprints because the land is cheaper and there is more available in developing areas," he said.

Drop in growth rate

Ladders and cardboard fill the two empty bookends of Prosper High, where 850 students attend a school built for closer to 2,000.

Watkins says the school will become a community asset as the town grows. It will host visiting performers in the school's auditorium and bring championship teams to the professional-looking arena.

But he doesn't say what will happen if the growth stops.

That's because he doesn't believe it will, even though the district's rate of enrollment growth has dropped from 17 percent last year to about 10 percent this year. Increases have reached 25 percent in previous years.

Nearby districts share a similar confidence.

"It's wise for anybody along the Preston Corridor or the Dallas North Tollway to plan," said Celina ISD Superintendent Rob O'Connor. "You know the saying: 'If you built it they will come.' The economy has slowed us down, but we don't have any reason to anticipate a decrease once it bounces back."

Too spacious?

The Prosper school's dimensions were met with good-natured grumbles by at least one of the town's residents, who was eating lunch with his wife at the Cotton Gin Cafe.

"Is it a lot bigger than it needed to be? Yes," said Travis Sims, who owns a self-storage business in town. He said he considers it an attempt to "impress other schools," but concedes that the district will need the space.

But for now, there's almost too much space, joked Preston Mitchell, a senior at the school on his way to class.

"I came in the wrong door this morning and ended up in the gym," he said.

"We're not a small town anymore."

NEW NORTH TEXAS HIGH SCHOOLS

A sampling of new area high schools and the costs to build them:

District	High school	Opened	Cost to build*	Square footage	Price per square foot
Sunnyvale	Sunnyvale	2009	\$26 million	110,000	\$236
Frisco	Heritage	2009	\$73 million	345,000	\$212
Prosper	Prosper	2009	\$113.5 million	589,505	\$193
Northwest	Byron Nelson	2009	\$96 million	504,000	\$190
Frisco	Liberty	2007	\$60 million	340,000	\$176
Frisco	Wakeland	2006	\$59 million	340,000	\$174
Rockwall	Rockwall-Heath	2005	\$48.7 million	282,410	\$172
Wylie	Wylie East	2007	\$45.9 million	268,000	\$171
Celina	Celina	2008	\$40 million	260,000	\$154
Lovejoy	Lovejoy	2006	\$33 million	225,000	\$147

*Some cost figures do not include fixtures, furniture, technology or classroom equipment.