

District gets moving on intermediate school

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It's already been a two-year process, but now the work has started on the next phase of making a new school in Austin a reality and adding space for kindergartners.

Voters approved the \$28.9 million bond referendum Tuesday, allowing Austin Public Schools to build an intermediate school and an addition and modifications to Woodson Kindergarten Center.

"It feels good to see that hard work pays off," said Mark Stotts, director of finance and operations. "And I think we're going to do some really good things for the community of Austin as well as the school district."

Stotts got to work right away the morning after the election, to begin working on the logistics of the bond issue. The school board will authorize the sale of bonds in January, and then the bonds will be sold in February, Stotts said.

He met with the architects and construction management firm Thursday, and they will probably be going out for bid on the Woodson project in early February. The intermediate school building project needs initial design work, which staff will need to be involved in, Stotts said.

"We have a lot of work to do in terms of design," Stotts said. "So that's going to take a little bit longer. But we have more time on that."

The plan is to break ground on the new school in spring and begin construction for Woodson in the spring. This will get the six additional classroom spaces at the kindergarten center ready for the 2012-13 school year; the fifth- and sixth-grade school wouldn't be ready until 2013-14.

"A lot of work is going to have to be done over the next six months or so, particularly with Woodson because we want to get that off the ground as soon as possible this spring," Stotts said.

The first step will be to focus on the Woodson project, especially with a short construction season. Officials will need to move quickly to get everything into place and ready for students by fall. At Woodson, Principal Jean McDermott said they will meet with architects and also with staff to get their input on the educational needs for the new classrooms.

District officials will start discussing how to configure the classrooms and what kinds of programming will go in them, McDermott said. For example, the school doesn't have a computer lab right now, so they'll look at that.

Half of Woodson's gymnasium is also set up as a play center because of a lack of space. But now, staff will be able to put the play centers in "more appropriate settings" for students, McDermott said. Also, some of the support staff who are sharing spaces now will be able to have their own spaces, to make it easier to work with students.

With an enrollment of 396 students at Woodson currently, they have 23 or 24 kids in a classroom because of space.

"Our goal is to have it sitting around 20 in a classroom," McDermott said.

Before the building is ready, the district will have to find somewhere else to house kindergarten through second grade summer school, which is usually at Woodson. It will probably move to another elementary school, McDermott said.

Next year's kindergartners on the 45/15 schedule also won't be able to start at Woodson at the beginning of August. So the hope is to have them start at Sumner Elementary, where the other 45/15 students are, until they can return to Woodson following construction. There are two kindergarten sections on the modified schedule this year at Woodson.

McDermott said that while Austin "very much supports education," she is also aware of the tough economic times. She was unsure which way the referendum vote would swing, but ultimately, the voters came up with a "yes" vote.

"We're looking for a long-term investment here," McDermott said. "We're just excited."