

Woodson classrooms bursting at the seams

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Labor Day weekend. A time for enjoying the unofficial end of summer, savoring cheese curds in the last few days of the Minnesota State Fair and a big thing on the minds of students, preparing for the first day of school.

Students in Austin Public Schools, as well as Pacelli Catholic Schools, will start their 2011-12 school year Tuesday. Of course, the only exceptions are the kids who've been in school since Aug. 1 at Sumner Elementary School and two classes at Woodson Kindergarten Center; they are on the 45/15 modified calendar.

The big buzz surrounding the district this year, and especially this fall, is the \$28.9 million bond referendum that will be on the ballot Nov. 8. The question for tax payers will be whether they would like to vote in favor of the district building a new grades 5-6 school and make an addition at Woodson to accommodate growing enrollments.

The Woodson addition would include two additional classrooms, two computer labs and two play centers. The school has half of its gymnasium set up as a play center. It's shared by all students, but that means they can only get play center time every other day.

"Play is such an important part of kindergarten," said principal Jean McDermott.

Each of the classrooms have two computer stations for students to share. But with computer labs, students could be able to start developing skills even as basic as learning how to operate a mouse or know how to log in to a program.

Also in the levy plans will be to have the current administration area on the west side of the building converted into space for special education. Needing a safer and more secure entrance to the building is an issue at Woodson, so the administration would move to the east side of the building, near the parking lot.

"It is very inconvenient to have the office over there," McDermott said.

The district went to all-day, everyday kindergarten seven years ago. All the classes were centered at Woodson since more space was needed to house kids for the kindergarten classes. But there wasn't space back then either, McDermott said. They expected to start out with 250 students in the building. Instead, they have 350.

"We came to this building thinking we had oodles of space," McDermott said.

Since then the student population hasn't dipped below 350. A couple years ago they had 390 kids. A demographer who conducted a study for the district predicted Woodson would hit 390 again this year. They've already reached it, McDermott said, and with a few stragglers that may come to school just after the year starts, she is guessing they will hit the 400 mark.

They've had 16 classrooms each year at Woodson, and the preferable number of students per classroom is 20 or 21. But with so many more kids, that number has risen to 24 students in a classroom with one teacher and one para-professional.