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Franklin Township Breaks Ground for New High School; State to Cover Thirty Percent of the Costs

FRANKLIN — The Franklin Township Board of Education joined administration, parents and other honored guests Saturday in Somerset County for a ceremonial groundbreaking for a new and improved high school and other facilities.

The event took place Saturday, Oct. 5, at 2 p.m. on Heller Park Lane off Schoolhouse Road. A reception followed.

The 6,000-student district is embarking on a \$69.9 million expansion project that includes a brand-new high school on Heller Park Lane and various building renovations that will include a restructuring of grades. District officials hope the district-wide changes will be ready for the start of the 2005-06 school year.

The state is doing its part to ensure quality education for the Franklin Township students by covering 30 percent of the overall project cost, \$19.7 million, through the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act.

"This is a very positive move for our township and for our students," said Eva M. Nagy, the school board president. "It's extremely important for us. It allows our students to enter a building for academic excellence, not just a building of mortar and bricks only."

Chief among reasons for the expansion project, district officials say, is a need to accommodate rising enrollments. At the same time, the district will look to lower the number of children per classroom. From 1990 to 2000, the Franklin Township School District enrollment increased by 19 percent.

When the district began studying whether to expand three years ago, student enrollment was 5,600. Now, it's 6,000. In the high school alone, enrollment three years ago was 1,300. It rose to 1,550 this year and officials predict it will be 2,000 by 2005.

In addition to the new high school, key components for the project include:

- Implementing full-day kindergarten;
- Implementing early education programs;
- Removing outdated temporary portable classrooms.

As part of the expansion proposal, the district will change school configurations as follows: pre-kindergarten through fourth-grade will attend the same school, as will fifth- and sixth-graders, seventh- and eighth-graders, and grades 9-12. The district formerly had pre-K through third grade in the same school, as well as fourth-through sixth grades.

"What it does for us is keep kids who are similar in age together," Acting Superintendent William Westfield said. "This is a very exciting time here — not just because of what we're doing at the high school but also in renovating the other schools."

Officials say they expect the high school to be open and operating by midway through the 2004-05 school year. All other schools should be renovated and open by fall, 2005.