



PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Ohio District Builds \$52 Million Campus through Partnerships with Local Community, University

By John Stoddard | 08/01/22

Being part of a new campus build can be both exhilarating and exhausting, especially in a pandemic. But being able to bring our vision to reality and, in the process, create a legacy in our community may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

After 17 years in education at Oak Hills Schools, a larger suburban school district in suburban Cincinnati, I was looking for my next opportunity. I found it five years ago at Berkshire Local Schools in Burton, Ohio.

Before being selected as the new superintendent, I was intrigued by their PRIME initiative, which stands for Partnership for Rural Innovative Models of Education. The more I learned, the more I wanted to be part of it. PRIME is the name that was given to an innovative PK-16 approach to education to consolidate our smaller rural schools into a larger PreK-12 school on the Kent State University – Geauga campus.

The idea was to create more opportunities for our students while creating a more robust feeder system into the Kent State University system, the Auburn Career Center for technical skills, and University Hospitals for a new healthcare track for high-school students.



It is a natural extension of the education process, allowing students to explore different career and trade paths. It can also reduce the overall higher education and training costs for families since their children can take college credits, learn a trade in diesel mechanics, and even explore healthcare opportunities through our programming. It also fits in perfectly with our project-based learning approach, as we teach our students how to embrace the concepts they learn in real-world situations.

When we were in the design phase of the school build, these were all cornerstones of our educational principles.

The idea was to combine the different schools under one main, new campus building. The school has three wings for Pre-K/elementary, middle school, and high school, a large central cafeteria common area, and a new auditorium and multiple gyms. This approach creates economies of scale for our food service team, allowing for different lunch schedules, with one larger kitchen for efficiency.

As part of our project-based learning approach, we also have an ample maker space used by multiple grades, a diesel mechanics area and new classrooms and labs. Backed by research, project-based learning deepens students' understanding of key concepts by giving them real-world projects to apply what they're learning academically. This helps build the soft skills employers are seeking, including collaboration, communication, and critical-thinking skills.

The other unique aspect of our campus is our immersive themed areas. One of our key design partners, Inventionland Education, designed and constructed several of our age-appropriate areas.

We first learned about Inventionland Education during a tour of their facilities with faculty and staff. On our way back, we discussed how it would be groundbreaking to have their style of immersive spaces as part of our new campus. They're one of the most significant invention factories in America.

The areas that Inventionland developed include a kindergarten cabin area, 1st and 2nd-grade castle, a treehouse space for our 3rd and 4th graders, a pirate ship for 5th and 6th-grade students, a robot space for middle schoolers, as well as unique maker spaces for our highschool students. In my opinion, these unique spaces help foster creativity while working perfectly with our project-based learning approach.

Our new auditorium can seat up to 620 people and will be the centerpiece for large gatherings, concerts, and student performances.

What we're most proud of is the way our community came together to build this new state-of-the-art campus. Because being in a smaller rural community that covers 118 square miles certainly has its challenges.

As we know, there is not a single solution for students and their families as they go through the educational system. We are committed to providing students with opportunities for the future. This includes earning a living wage, having opportunities for advancement, and having access to healthcare as our students begin their next stage of life.

We believe that the future is different for everyone. We want to provide the foundation for success, however it's defined. Every student should have options, whether it's going to college, learning a trade, joining the military, or exploring business and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Another aspect of the new build is the advantage our students will have by taking some of the advanced learning options. This includes students enrolled in our College Credit Plus classes (taught by KSU instructors on their campus or ours), allowing high school students to graduate with an Associate Degree. Students can also explore the healthcare field with our nursing program through University Hospitals or begin to learn a trade, such as diesel mechanics on our campus, or through the many programs offered at the Auburn Career Center.



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This comprehensive partnership was made possible by the entire community working together. This includes the 99-year ground lease from Kent State University, as well as our local community, which voted overwhelmingly for the new school bond. Other partners include University Hospitals, Auburn Career Center, the Geauga Growth Partnership, the KeyBank Foundation, Envision Education, Inventionland Education, the Buck Institute for Education, and the Ohio Facilities and Construction

Commission. Regarding costs, a little over half was paid for by the Ohio Facilities and Construction Commission, with the rest of the funding coming from the school bond proceeds, community partners, and Berkshire Local Schools.

We were also fortunate to receive a \$2-million donation from Great Lakes Cheese, a premier manufacturer and packager of cheese, for our new athletic facilities.

This partnership should pay big dividends for the entire community moving forward. Students will benefit from the modern campus, with the ability to get a jumpstart on college, learn a trade or enter the healthcare arena.

The community will benefit from graduates who are well prepared to excel in today's job market, and more robust real estate values from improved school rankings. In addition, Kent State University gains a local and consistent source for higher education students. I said this from the onset: This is a vast "win-win" for everyone involved. With access to additional trade job opportunities, students have another option to make the American Dream a reality.

Although delayed from construction supply chain issues throughout the pandemic, the school will open in August 2022. School and community leaders will celebrate with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on August 9th at 6 p.m., and the public is welcome to attend. There will also be a livestream of the event.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Stoddard has been the superintendent of Berkshire Local Schools since 2017. Before Berkshire, Stoddard spent 17 years at Oak Hills Schools, a suburban Cincinnati school district where he held the role of Principal for J.F. Dulles Elementary School, Rapid Run Middle School, and Oak Hills High School. He brings a strong team-first approach, and his project-based learning philosophy has helped transformed learning at Berkshire.

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