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At long last, Mountain View Whisman's new Vargas Elementary School opens its doors



Frida, 5, walks into her kindergarten classroom with a big smile on her face on the first day at Jose Antonio Vargas Elementary School, the Mountain View Whisman School District's new school, on Aug. 19, 2019. Photo by Magali Gauthier

by Kevin Forestieri / Mountain View Voice

Excitement hung in the air Monday morning as hundreds of kids and parents streamed into the new Jose Antonio Vargas Elementary School, capping off a long-fought community effort to bring a public school campus to the neighborhood.

Families lined up at the gates of the school to take photo right up until the first minute of class, with a few of them getting gently nudged to their classrooms to avoid being tardy. Some children showed up to school already sporting the school's green t-shirt with a picture of the Vargas Elementary mascot, the golden owl.

Principal Vern Taylor, outside navigating foot traffic and handing out high-fives to every kid in his path, said it's the first time he has been to a school on its opening day. He said it's a little more frenetic than usual, but that it's been a positive experience so far.

"It's a whirlwind, but it's a good whirlwind," he said.



Sean Dechter, a third grade teacher at Jose Antonio Vargas Elementary School, welcomes his new students on the first day of school on Aug. 19. Photo by Magali Gauthier



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Vargas Elementary is the result of three years of planning and two years of construction to bring a public school to an underserved area of the district, roughly bounded by Central Expressway to the south and Highway 85 to the west. The area previously had two schools -- Whisman Elementary and Slater Elementary -- but both were closed due to declining enrollment and financial problems.

Without a neighborhood school, families in the area were rezoned to attend Huff, Landels and Theuerkauf elementary schools, fracturing neighborhoods in the area and making it nearly impossible to walk to school.

Despite worries that the first day of school would bring a traffic and parking nightmare, the majority of families arriving Monday appear to have walked. Getting to Vargas on foot will only get easier with time -- the plan is to install a traffic light at North Whisman Road and Pacific Drive, making it less tempting to jaywalk across a busy thoroughfare.

Though construction at Vargas was largely complete this week, there were signs of missing plants and play structures, and the future field is still an active construction site with large trucks and mounds of dirt.

The school is also contending with a dispute between PG&E and a nearby homeowners association over a utility hookup to the school, forcing the district to rely on a gas generator to keep the school powered. Several classrooms on the second floor of the campus remain dark and empty, pending a PG&E power hookup that will allow use of the elevators and make the second floor comply with ADA accessibility requirements.

Bringing the community together under the banner of Vargas Elementary has been a top priority for several months, said Sarah Reginaldo, Vargas' first PTA president. Juggling the first-day photos, managing PTA membership sign-ups and hastily shuffling around a small utility cart with supplies Monday, Reginaldo told the *Voice* that she jumped on the opportunity to bring together the previously fragmented neighborhoods under the banner of a new school.

"I said let's try to make it the best it can be on day one," Reginaldo said.

Leading up to the first day of school, Reginaldo and founding PTA members hosted play dates aimed at uniting the area, kicked off by a "May Fest" social on May 4 when more than 300 people showed up. Besides in-person meetups, she said they used postcards, snail mail and word of mouth -- pretty much everything short of door-to-door solicitations -- to prepare families for the new school, she said.

Fundraising and financing school programs through the PTA is still a work in progress, and will likely include a mix of new and existing programs from schools like Huff and Landels, where a majority of parents came from. It may take a while to emulate programs that have been established for decades at other schools, she said.

"They're going to want what they had at their schools, and I'm not sure we can get there yet," Reginaldo said.

Though the school has a lot of new staff members-- six new teachers and one re-hired teacher -- five teachers from elsewhere in the district volunteered in March to reassign themselves to Vargas for its first year. Sean Dechter, a third-grade teacher at Vargas who switched from Monta Loma, told the *Voice* he was excited to be a part of the new school.

"As a child, I started as a kindergartner at a brand new elementary school in Oceanside, (California)," he said. "I thought this was a great opportunity for me as a teacher to start at a new school."

Last Thursday, the district hosted a dedication ceremony at the new campus honoring Jose Antonio Vargas. A former Mountain View resident who lived a short jaunt from the school after emigrating from the Philippines as a child, Vargas went on to become a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker and an outspoken immigrant rights activist. Vargas was a teen when he discovered he was an undocumented immigrant, and announced his status in a 2011 New York Times Magazine story after hiding it for years.

Speaking to a packed crowd in the sweltering multipurpose room on Thursday, Aug. 15, Vargas stressed the importance of community and breaking down barriers through the power of storytelling, which has helped him communicate with people across the country with different points of view. He said he effectively has two families in the United States -- direct family members and the thousands of friends and acquaintances he's built over the years.

"I wouldn't be the human being I am without community," he said. "The school, our school, represents the power of community."

Vargas was on hand Monday morning, greeting new students and parents.

Big changes across the district

The 2019-20 school year has been marked on calendars for years as a critical moment for the Mountain View Whisman School District, setting in motion plans to open Vargas and completely redraw school attendance boundaries. Aiming to accommodate a new school and bring relief to chronically overcrowded campuses south of El Camino Real, the school board agreed in 2017 on new attendance boundaries with a goal of keeping schools between 400 and 450 students.

It's still unclear how close the school district will get to those numbers, but it does mean Aug. 19 was the first day at a new school for hundreds of students who were relocated as a result of the new boundaries. Landels Elementary School, which took the brunt of the changes, was expected to lose 106 students who will now attend Vargas this year, according to 2018 estimates. In their place, an estimated 76 students from the Shoreline West neighborhood who used to go to Bubb will be at Landels this year.

Fall 2019 also means the end of several straight years of construction that has torn up, rebuilt and renovated every school site in the district. The original Measure G bond passed by voters in 2014 has been exhausted, putting an end to the near-constant presence of hard hats, dust and fencing. The 2019-20 school year brings improved portable classrooms to Bubb, Huff and Landels elementary schools as well as the district's three preschool sites, and an expanded playground and new furniture at the shared Castro and Mistral elementary school site, according to a district staff report.

Although the original construction schedule shows everything was supposed to be completed by July 2019, a few things remain unfinished. Theuerkauf's expanded multipurpose room won't be done until October, and Vargas Elementary's field is tentatively scheduled to be done by March 2020.

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