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Private school in American Fork announces expansion



Janice Peterson - Daily Herald

The American Heritage School, a private school in American Fork, announced plans on Wednesday to expand the school to include a full high school program.

Grant Beckwith, principal of American Heritage, said the school has begun a \$4 million expansion of its building, adding 15 classrooms that will house the school's middle and high school programs. American Heritage School currently has grades K-10, and 11th-grade classes will be added in the fall.

In the midst of dire economic times, Beckwith said the school's developments are a positive step.

"We've got some good news," he said.

A 12th-grade program also will be added in fall 2010, and new classes in each elementary grade level will be added as well. Along with additions to the building, the school is in the process of acquiring land north of the property. The land will be converted to a large parking area and green space.

Beckwith said the school's expansion and other new developments are part of the school's 20-year plan, which he said is summarized in the school's mission statement.

"By 2027, American Heritage School will be an effective educational resource for parents worldwide in assisting children and families to maximize their divine potential," the statement reads.

A pilot distance learning program has been launched in response to inquiries from around the country and across the world, Beckwith said. The school is working on offering courses online and already has seven students from Idaho and Utah using the pilot program. Through the program, students around the globe can have the same access to teachers and programs, he said.

Officials hope to have the distance learning program open to the public in 2010, Beckwith said. In the meantime, assistant principal Leland Anderson said the school will be working to get the program accredited through agencies that work with online classes. Tuition and different ways of delivering the content are also being worked out.

"We are testing and making sure we have the technological capacity and human resources capacity to deliver that well," he said.

Anderson said the program allows students to participate with classes through live streaming, or later with a recording. While this component gives more flexibility to distance learners, it also allows current students to keep up with the work if they weren't in school.

Along with extra classrooms, the expansion also will have a new orchestra facility for the students acquired from the now-closed Music School. The 120 orchestra students from around the valley have been practicing after school on the stage, in the library or in the auditorium this year, Anderson said. Not only will the orchestra have a place to practice and store instruments, but orchestra will be added into the curriculum for full-time students as well, he said.

Beckwith said the architect for the addition drew up a design that included an orchestra room, even before the Music School orchestras were acquired in October.

"If you build it, they will come," he said. "At the time, we didn't know who 'they' were, but in October 2008 it became clear."

Anderson said although the school is moving forward with the expansion, the economy did raise some questions in the process. However, the school has not had a drop in enrollment and even continues to grow. The extra space was needed, and building now seems prudent.

"It's a good time to build," he said. "Costs of labor, costs of materials are down."

Families continue to express interest in the school, and Anderson said financial aid requirements have been loosened slightly to help families hurting from the economy. Expanding the grade levels offered can increase the burden on families as more of their children can attend the school, but the financial aid should help offset those problems, he said.

"We want to offer this kind of education to students of all ages," he said.

Holly Welch, a 10th-grader from Highland, said she is excited to be a member of the first 11th grade this fall as well as the first graduating class. Welch said she is glad high school classes will be offered so that others will be able to have the same opportunities she has had at the school.

Welch said she has three siblings at the school as well, and she may end up paying her own tuition next year in order to stay at American Heritage School. However, she said it is worth it, and she wouldn't miss the opportunity for the world.

"I would be willing to sacrifice my time and work over the summer in order to come here," she said.

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