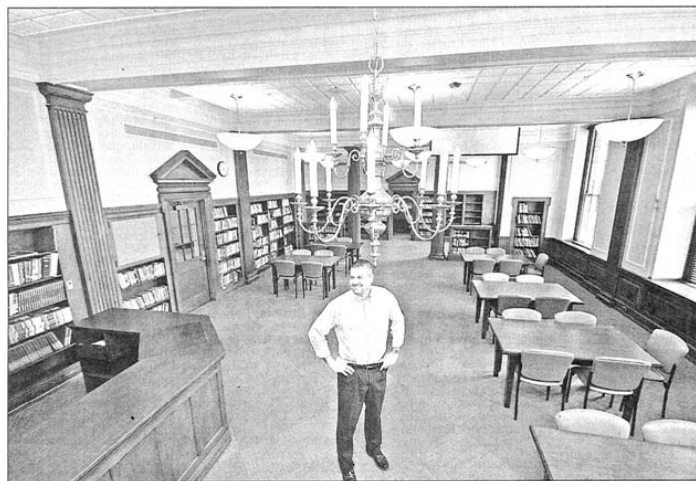


On top of the (P.S. du Pont Elementary) world



The News Journal/FRED COMEGYS
Painters Frank Kaminski (foreground), and Julio Santiago put finishing touches Thursday on the cupola of the P.S. du Pont Elementary School, or 'The Palace,' as it was known to students in the 1930s and 1940s. "It was made by true craftsmen, and I'm proud to renovate this building," said Michael Petka, project manager for Bancroft Construction Co. of Wilmington, the primary contractor. The school's \$44 million renovation is one of the most expensive in Delaware history. On the horizon is the Wilmington skyline. See story on B3.



The News Journal/FRED COMEGYS
P.S. du Pont Elementary Principal Lincoln Hohler stands near the main desk in the school's renovated library.

P.S. du Pont officials lead tour of \$44M renovation

Innovations blend with preservation of craftsmanship of 'The Palace'

By EDWARD L. KENNEY
The News Journal

The \$44 million makeover at P.S. du Pont Elementary School — one of the most expensive school renovations in state history — has been much anticipated by the school's new principal, Lincoln Hohler, who transferred from nearby Harlan Elementary in Wilmington.

"I had to drive by this building for 16 years to get to Harlan. It's such an impressive structure from outside," he said. "Curriculum is going to be the same that we've taught, but look at the wrapper we've put it in."

Hohler spoke from his office as officials who worked on the school's renovation led a tour of the gleaming building on Thursday.

The stately school, with its towering white cupola, cost just under \$2 million when it was built as a high school in 1934 and 1935. It was at the height of the Depression — but featured currently cost-prohibitive materials and cutting-edge innovations such as intercom and built-in vacuum-cleaning systems.

"It was made by true craftsmen, and I'm proud to renovate this building," said Michael Petka, project manager for Bancroft Construction Co. of Wilmington, the primary contractor.

"The Palace," as it was known to students in the 1930s and 1940s, was converted into an elementary school in 1978. When it was built, the 230,000-square-foot building was designed to accommodate 2,250 students. District leaders expect fewer than 650 students will begin classes there Aug. 25.

The work, which started last summer, includes a remodeled cafeteria

with newly uncovered pyramid skylights, a food area that resembles a mall food court and four new bathrooms to shorten the gotta-go distance created by the big building.

The auditorium's 1,200 theater seats were sent out for professional restoration. New state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems also were installed, as well as electronically activated stage curtains.

Tour guide Chandra Nilekani, the project architect for ABHA Architects of Wilmington, led the way into a classroom, as motion-detectors switched on the lights. Those lights also will dim or brighten according to the amount of sunlight outside.

"Glare hurts the learning environment," she said.

Nilekani also pointed to special chairs that have some spring in them as the children lean back, a design that has been found to help the students become more attentive in class, she said.

Linoleum flooring in the school's hallways has been replaced with low-maintenance and less-noisy rubber.

"With the right sound conditions, students learn better," Nilekani said. Four-inch-thick colorful rubber in a new playground courtyard is designed for safety.

"Kids falling from a 10-foot height will not hurt themselves on this," Nilekani said.

Temperature and humidity levels and hallway lighting are all computer-controlled, said John Read, the Brandywine School District's construction project manager. It used to take custodians a half-hour to turn off all the hallway lights, he added, and that now can be done with the flick of a switch.

AROUND THE DISTRICT

Renovation of P.S. du Pont Elementary was funded through a \$148 million capital referendum passed in 2005. The referendum also will fund several other projects.

Construction of a new Lancashire Elementary School and renovation work at Springer Middle School are now under way. Once Lancashire is built, the old Lancashire building will be torn down.

Following the upcoming school year, the closed Hanby Middle School will be demolished to build the new Brandywood Elementary School, which will include an addition to house the new Bush Early Learning Center.

The district also plans to relocate its administrative offices in Claymont, with several sites being considered.

Because many of the original construction materials are so expensive today, some of them were salvaged from various parts of the school and used in other areas, including chestnut shelving from storage closets that were milled to become trim to surround blackboards.

Work at the school also has included renovation of the school's brick swimming-pool building behind the main structure. Built in 1971, it now features a new pool filtration system, solar panels and handicapped accessibility. The pool will serve the school children as well as the community.

Among those who came for Thursday's tour was Esther Rowley Lebergern, of Churchville, Md., who graduated from the school with the Class of 1947.

"I was just so proud to go to this stately school," she said. "I was born in Virginia and went to a country school and to be able to come here was just overwhelming."

Contact Edward L. Kenney at 324-2891 or ekenny@delawareonline.com.