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Alternative school sculpted outside 'box'

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When the new Feather River Academy opens for the 2005 spring semester, students will not be getting a boring, generic version of a school campus.

"It'll be more than just your box," said Sutter County Office of Education Superintendent Jeff Holland. "It's beyond a box."

Holland was referring to the new alternative school's design, which took nearly two years to plan and has already garnered an award from the American Institute of Architect for unique design for small schools.

"It'll be both a very functional and aesthetic facility, one of the most unique and visually appealing schools in our community," Holland said.

Located at the corner of Klamath Lane and Lassen Boulevard in Yuba City, it is the first high school the Sutter County Office of Education has built in its 150-year history, said Holland.

The seventh- through 12th-grade school currently serves some 120 at-risk students, the largest enrollment it has ever had. The new school, which broke ground last week, will enable enrollment to reach 200 students.

Holland said the goal is to maintain the program's small-school environment so students do not feel disconnected and lost as they would at a larger campus.

Students typically end up at Feather River because they've been expelled from traditional schools or were placed by the courts or probation. For some students, Feather River is their second stop after an unsuccessful trial at a continuation school such as Albert Powell High School in Yuba City. Because Feather River is not a lockdown facility, said Holland, teens who are felons or have criminal backgrounds are not referred to the school but to a county probation program.

"Our goal is always to mainstream (the students) back to their regular school," he said.

Sutter County Office of Education received \$8.2 million from a state grant to build the new facility, which hopes to give its at-risk students the equivalent of a high school. Students in the program currently use the Career Training and Education Center in Yuba City, which offers none of the amenities of a regular high school - meaning no cafeteria, recreational facilities, library or playground.

"Typically, alternative education is shoved in the back of the school, away from humanity," said Holland.

The new Feather River, however, will not be something to be tucked away in the corner. The 26,000-square-foot facility will house a multipurpose room, which will serve as a community center and theater and will be open to the community to use. A dedicated classroom will act as a satellite for Yuba College, enabling the community college to bring back some of its programs to the school. The new school will also have a training facility to serve about 15 severely handicapped students a year.

Students also played an integral role in some of the design of the new school. They assisted in design of the student quad, which features outdoor seating and a small garden. They also helped pick the colors and wall treatments for the school. It was also the students' idea to incorporate a "green" design concept into the classrooms by using natural lighting and heating as a way to help conserve energy, said Holland.

"The idea is involving the users of the building," he said.

Other highlights include campus sidewalks that are designed to be used as learning tools. They will feature a human sundial, a scale model of the universe and solar system, a giant ruler of the standard metric system and geometric shapes embedded in the concrete.

"Visually, it will complement and harmonize with the community," Holland said.

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