

## Moving in: Heritage High School fills with furniture and equipment

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**Rachel Brown**



Heritage High School Principal Ronnie Bradford (left) and Athletic Director Eric Beagles perch proudly below the new four-sided score board in the school's gymnasium.

Heritage High School Principal Ronnie Bradford says there are five images that will always stand out in his mind.

They are the look on his wife's face when they married, the births of their three children and the sight of the new four-sided scoreboard that hangs from the ceiling in the middle of the new school's gym. Yet after Bradford gives a tour of the nearly completed \$42 million school – the first high school to open in Catoosa County in 35 years – he says that while the new equipment and classrooms are nice, the school is about a lot more than bricks and mortar.

"After you get used to the building, it's a building," Bradford said. "The special part is the people."

He said the school's Hands Across Heritage fundraiser on Saturday, June 14 was one example of how parents, teachers, students and the community bonded together to raise money to pay back loans on purchasing uniforms and equipment. Families and individuals paid money to sign up for the event in which participants joined hands to form a human link between Heritage High and neighboring Heritage Middle School. Bradford said the event raised \$12,000.



The county's newest high school is set to serve its first students in August 2008.

With the opening of Heritage High, more people are choosing Catoosa's public school system, Bradford said. He said several home school and private school students are enrolled for the upcoming year.

Parent Ted Gocke, whose daughter Lauren and son Trevor are transferring from Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe High School, is a member of a parent advisory group that has met at least once a month for several years to plan for the new school's opening. He said people across the area are excited about the new school.

"I don't know what parent wouldn't be excited about their kids being able to go to school in this environment," he said.

Eric Beagles, baseball coach and athletic director for Heritage High, said the building is state-of-the-art and "unbelievable," but it won't make his team better winners or worse losers. "(The building) is part of it," he said, "but it's the people involved as well."

#### Long-range plans

School system operations director Damon Raines said the sheer enormity of the project and keeping all of the involved parties informed so that it would open on time were the biggest obstacles he faced since planning began in 2004. This is the first time he's overseen the opening of a new school.

Within about three weeks, the school should be complete and ready for students when school begins on Aug. 7, he said. Several coaches, athletic directors, teachers and parents helped with moving furniture into Heritage High over the last couple of weeks. The summer maintenance staff also helped as did the football team, Bradford said.

Raines said Heritage was built to serve 1,250 students but can be expanded with additional classrooms to serve 1,800. Planning for the school began in 2004 when the community determined it was time to have another facility to alleviate the overcrowding at Ringgold High School and Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe High School.

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#### Current Heritage High population

Freshmen: 308

Sophomores: 250

Juniors: 163

Seniors: 70

Source: Principal Ronnie Bradford on June 17

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#### Projected 2008-09 school populations

Ringgold: 1,300, down from 1,800 last year

Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe: 1,150, down from 1,356

Source: Director of operations Damon Raines

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"If the growth continues in the middle of the county, we should be OK for a while," he said.

Heritage High will feature several amenities including a 915-seat auditorium where officials expect to hold the first graduation next spring.

Work is underway to create an outdoor classroom and wetlands nature park on the property that students throughout the county can use. Ringgold-based Envision Ecology LLC is working to obtain upstart grants to begin some of the work, Raines said.

While many people are excited about opening a new school, Raines said the effect of opening Heritage High will also trickle down to improve the other schools. They'll be less crowded, and Ringgold High for the first time in several years will be able to house all of its students inside the building rather than shipping scores of them out to the 30-plus mobile classrooms sprawled around the campus.

Gocke said the fact that students zoned to attend Heritage Middle will no longer have to reestablish themselves among so many new peers will be good. Until this year, middle school students had to move to LFO or Ringgold High after eighth grade.