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Maryville breaks ground on Niles school for special needs students

A new high school for special education students formally moved ahead with construction at Niles' former South School on Touhy Avenue Wednesday and expects to open to students in fall 2023.

School staff and administrators from Maryville Academy, a nonprofit organization, celebrated the project at a breakfast gathering in the school's gymnasium, surrounded by tape and the dust of an active construction site.

The Charles H. Walsh Senior Academy and Career Tech High school, an expansion of Maryville Academy's Jen School in Des Plaines will serve about 120 students with individualized education programs, or IEP's, with an expanded focus on trades and vocational training.

It is a major expansion for the school, Principal Anne Craig said – from a total of 32,350 square feet over two facilities to a 56,000 square-foot space.

Craig and other school leaders said the project has been almost a decade in the making, beginning with a pitch to add classroom space at the school's existing Des Plaines campus and mushrooming into a \$10.5 million undertaking in Niles.

“I’ve had this vision of getting our kids the opportunity to have career, technical training, actual vocational training on our campus since I joined the Maryville family,” Craig said.

She’s been with the institution for about 15 years. “It wasn’t [financially] feasible to build a whole new school,” Craig said.

So school leaders looked at making additions to the existing campus, but the rising cost of materials and labor eventually ruled out that option as well.

“What we wanted to do is build a construction lab, a welding lab, those kinds of things. It just became too expensive to do that there.

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(Above) Jen School Principal Ann Craig, at podium, and Assistant Principal Heather Lischett speak at a groundbreaking ceremony for Maryville Academy's new school, Charles H. Walsh Sr. Academy and Career Tech High School.

(Below) Maryville administrators and board members and Jen School leadership pose for a photo at a groundbreaking ceremony for the Charles H. Walsh Sr. Academy and Career Tech High School.



Maryville Academy last year [purchased the school building](#) from Niles School District 71 for \$2.5 million.

Craig said the school was planning a capital fundraising campaign to help finance the project, which is being supported by Maryville Academy, a state grant worth \$250,000 and members of the namesake Walsh family.

Once construction is complete, school administrators say the school will be the only one in Illinois to have a teacher, a social worker and a paraprofessional staff member in every classroom.

Craig said the idea behind that level of staffing isn't to control or manage students but to build relationships between students and staff who are there to help them.

"If your social worker is in their office five days a week and you only see your social worker on Thursdays, you're not building that relationship with that person," Craig said.

"A social worker who's based in a classroom can develop an understanding... of how the student ticks, those kinds of things. You may come in one day and something's just not right. [A social worker] can sense that because [they've] developed that relationship," said Craig.

The more immediate access to students can also help students who may have already missed academic work avoid missing more classroom time, Craig said, because staff can intervene more easily without pulling them out of ordinary programming.

The school will dramatically expand its technical and vocational training offerings into construction, small engine and bicycle repair and metalworking. Currently, she said, the school has eight classrooms for all of its curriculum. The new building will be eight classrooms just for technical and vocational learning and another 12 for academics.

Plans for the new facility also include a podcasting studio, a health lab and a garden and greenhouse.

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(Left) Construction is underway at the former District 71 South School, soon to be Charles H. Walsh Sr. Academy and Career Tech High School.

(Right) Eventgoers sign the stage in the gymnasium at a groundbreaking ceremony for the Charles H. Walsh Sr. Academy and Career Tech High School.

Currently, Jen School students do have “some exposure” to vocational and technical curriculum, Craig said. But the new campus will offer a fully scaled set of options for Jen students, or what Craig called “a regular ed experience and designed for special ed students.”

She estimated the school would need to hire between 15 and 20 new staff members once the project is complete.

School leadership has said it plans to partner with local unions and contractors to help students find employment beyond high school.

Dan Allen, executive director of the Construction Industry Service Corporation (CISCO), a non-profit labor management association based in Burr Ridge, hailed the school’s opening as part of a trades renaissance in Illinois and the U.S., citing the \$1.2. Billion Build Back Better plan and Gov. J.B. Pritzker’s Rebuild Illinois plan as proof of his statement.

“There’s an opportunity like we’ve never seen before. We’ve got projects and we need tradesmen and women and I believe that Charles Walsh School is going to be one of the incubators for those [people],” Allen said.

Niles Mayor George Alpogianis concurred with Allen. In a short speech, he also emphasized the growing need for skilled tradespeople.

“There is such a need for vocations in today’s world,” Alpogianis said. “Any attorneys out there, I’m sorry – there’s too many of you now. What do you know about a hammer and nails?”

The building is expected to be completed in time for Walsh Academy to open its doors to students in Fall 2023, administrators said.

Maryville, based in Des Plaines, is a nonprofit child-care agency with roots in Catholic social teaching. It offers behavioral health, residential, early childhood and educational programs for children and youth.



Niles Mayor George Alpogianis speaks at a groundbreaking ceremony for Charles H. Walsh Sr. Academy and Career Tech High School.