

EISD Continues to Make Accessibility Improvements (April '08)

Eanes ISD continues to make progress towards achieving universal accessibility in district facilities. The 2006 bond program included many individual projects related to improving accessibility; other enhancements are being done in conjunction with major renovations to areas such as the Library and Fine Arts Center. In all, more than \$5 million is being used for improvements at all nine schools. Upcoming projects include modifications to the nurse's clinic at West Ridge MS (\$40,414) and modifications to nurse's clinic and gym toilet at Forest Trail Elementary (\$166,614).

In addition to the projects that were slated for completion in the bond plan, Superintendent Nola Wellman convened a task force comprised of parents, the bond project management team, ADA (Americans With Disabilities Act) consultants and the district Maintenance Department to gather additional information and develop a plan to continue progress in this area.

"A collaborative team that included parents of disabled students has been important in the needs assessment because they possess a unique perspective that is valuable in our planning process," said Dr. Wellman.

In late fall, a team of consultants and members of the task force completed a comprehensive campus-by-campus needs assessment of all accessibility features. Many items were identified – nearly 1,900 – that, if a building was built today, would not be in compliance with ADA guidelines.

The next step was to categorize the items on a scale according to whether they are a safety issue, a functional issue, a technical issue or a universal accessibility issue. Then each of those four categories was ranked by low, medium or high priority. Projects were labeled according to whether they could be handled with current staff knowledge or if they would take engineering and/or architectural consulting. Cost estimates are being applied to these items and a plan has been developed to get to work on part of the list immediately.

"Our first priority is to address items that will improve safety," explained Dr. Wellman.

Dr. Wellman made a recommendation to the Board to get underway with the planned improvements immediately by applying \$1 million of interest earnings from the bond program. The recommendation was approved unanimously by the Board on March 26. An additional \$1.5 million of interest earnings has been identified for future potential use once the first wave of projects is complete.

At the meeting, Board member Ellen Balthazar supported the recommendation by noting, "I think this is a great idea to go above and beyond (ADA improvements included in) the current bond issue and get ahead on things that are still left to do outside of what is already committed. It's a great suggestion and a very creative way of getting started on these projects that need to be done."

In addition, possible program modifications are being examined to see where non-physical adjustments could be made to better serve students. For instance, a classroom used for a certain course might be relocated if that change would eliminate an obstacle for a student.

"We are proud of what we have accomplished in this process, one that certainly is more detailed and complete than I have ever seen in done by a public entity," Dr. Wellman summarized. "We wish we could correct every item immediately, but we need to make good decisions and move forward with a strong plan."