



McNary Heights second-graders run around their new gym Wednesday to warm up for class. Staff photos by Kathy Aney

MUSTANGS LOOSE IN NEW GYM

McNary Heights adds space with new facility

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

In their first week in the new gymnasium, McNary Heights Elementary students are already using the extra space to their advantage.

They stood in the four corners of the large room, in the circles painted onto the floor, for a game called "Keeper of the Castle." Each team had one player run to the center and try to grab a toy, without getting tagged by the "keepers," and run back to the circle.

"It's a big gym," said P.E. teacher Brandt Lind. "Let's see what happens with this game."

One student named Josue thought he had figured out the key to winning the game.

"I'll distract them with my dance moves," the second-grader said, kicking his feet back and forth as he waited for his next turn.

The students were enjoying one of their first P.E. classes in a new gym, the result of a \$10.5 million bond that paid for upgrades at the Umatilla School District's three schools. Other improvements from the bond include secure entrances and security cameras at all three schools, as well as new HVAC systems.

The building is completely new. Crews broke ground on it last June, and were just putting the finishing touches on it as students came back from winter break this week. The new building features the McNary Mustangs' green and yellow colors prominently, a group of mustangs painted on the center of the floor, and has a row of bleachers for parents to come and watch games or assemblies.

Lind said he's delighted with the new facility, and said the students are already taking ownership of it.

"If I see a black scuff mark on the floor, I'll stop to wipe it, and I'm seeing kids doing that," he said. "Or they'll tell me they wore white-soled shoes so they won't mess up the floor."

Lind said the new building, which is bigger and has higher ceilings than the old one, is a more comfortable environment for gym class.

"It circulates air a lot better, it's not stuffy," he said. "The kids' senses are on fire when they come in here. They smell the varnished floor, they see the colors, they love the mustangs in the center of the floor."

The gym has basketball and volleyball lines, as well as agility ladders and circles for group activities painted on the floor — things for which Lind would have previously had to use masking tape or traffic cones.

The new gym was a solution to another problem the school had run into: an overflowing cafeteria.

"Our original plan was to build a standalone cafeteria here," said McNary principal Rick Cotterell. "We were way overcrowded."

But after looking at prices, the district discovered that the cost of building a new cafeteria, including a new kitchen, would be too much

for their budget. So instead, they decided to use the existing gym, which sits next to the cafeteria, to accommodate students during lunch, and build a new gymnasium.

The additional space will give the school opportunities to expand their activities both during and after school.

Lind said the space will allow them to play games they'd usually have to go outside for, like soccer.

Cotterell said they will still continue using the old gym, but having two spaces will let them have more activities.

"Youth basketball always uses our facilities," he said. "Those kids practice 5:30 to 9, and with two times the space, we can have two teams practice at the same time and maybe get them home earlier."

He said the extra space will also be useful for their expanding after-school STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) program.

As the students tore around the room playing another game of tag, Lind asked them to line up for the next activity.

PE Expectations

- S**— Silent when the teacher is talking
- W**— Work
- E**— Enjoy the challenge!
- A**— Always come prepared (clothes and shoes)
- T**— Take care of each other

A sign hanging in the new McNary Heights gym lists expectations of students.

"Are you tired?" he asked the second-graders.

"No!" They yelled.

"You're never tired," Lind replied.

Cotterell said he's happy to have the new space for the kids.

"It's so fun to watch their faces," he said. "It's been really fun to build some of these new features."



McNary Heights second-graders race around their new gym Wednesday in a spirited game of tag.