

Article Last Updated: Saturday, March 05, 2005 - 12:52:08 PM MST

Students envision new school

By [JENNIFER KLEIN](#), Journal-Advocate Staff Writer

Imagine walking into a brand new high school, right here in Sterling. Passing through the sliding doors surrounded by glass walls, the eye is drawn upwards. A tiger formed in a stained glass window lurks over the two-storied atrium.

To the right sits the conveniently located main office, while off to the left is the counseling center. Imagine a school full of the latest amenities, as well as what staff and teachers think works best for them.

A group of students in Sterling did imagine that. Seven architecture students at Sterling High School designed a new high school as a class project.

The students began designing the school in September, unaware that the RE-1 Valley school board was in the midst of conducting a study on its buildings. **That study was put together for the school board by the Neenan Company - a company that recently invited the students to visit its main office in Fort Collins.** Joe Glaze, preconstruction manager for the Neenan Company, was touring Sterling High as part of his study when he found himself in Bernie Mathis' classroom.

After talking with the teacher, the Neenan employee was impressed with the magnitude of what the students were trying to accomplish.

"For them to take on something the size of a high school shows an enormous enthusiasm," said Glaze.

Most students at that level typically design something along the lines of a house, he



Jennifer Klein/Journal-Advocate

Students Brandon Steele and Zach Mueller continue their work on designing a new high school for Sterling. Their work with five other students has gotten the attention of architects at the Neenan Company, the group hired to put together a facility study for the RE-1 school board.

noted. Because of that, the students stayed in Glaze's mind and - after coordinating the trip with several of the company's architects - he invited the group to come up.

"It was phenomenal. I was impressed. They are very creative and thorough in their approach," said Glaze.

The Sterling students are the first group of high schoolers the Neenan Company has invited, Glaze said. Architecture and design students from Colorado State University are frequently brought in for instructional purposes - but never high school students.

From the man himself

The students visited the company's headquarters on Tuesday, carrying with them the floor plans of the school they had been working on for months. They met with two architects from the company, who looked over their project and critiqued it. They also had a surprise visitor - Chief Executive Officer David Neenan.

"My teeth almost fell out when he came in," said Mathis.

The students' excitement in meeting "Mr. Neenan" himself is still apparent in the classroom. Standing amidst the black laptops placed on the drafting tables, they begin to talk over one another about their visit.

"He was so full of energy," says 18-year-old Tyler Nicolaus.

"I was too shocked to clap," added 18-year Jeff Squier.

Neenan spoke with the students while the architects looked over their project. Mathis says the company's designers were impressed with his students' work.

"They told them they had never seen a space planning this sophisticated coming out of high school kids before," said Mathis. "That's a great compliment for these kids."

In the afternoon, the students visited a new high school in Fort Collins, discovering that they had unknowingly incorporated elements in their design that professional architects were already including in new schools.

"I think they did a great job," said RE-1 Maintenance Director Mike Manuello. "From what we've seen from other school plans, they're right on."

Included in the plans are a new sports complex, a theater, a two-story library and media center, an agriculture shop, art rooms and a greenhouse. The cafeteria has room so businesses such as McDonalds can come.

Plus, there is one other sought after feature.

"We finally have a commons," said 18-year-old Spencer Johnson.

Started as a joke

From their research, the students decided to make the theater a 1,200 seat auditorium so that Sterling - who has three 600 seat auditoriums - would have a venue to hold larger groups.

The sports complex and theater are attached on different sides of the building by a hallway. That way, the rest of the building could be shut down at night so only what is needed is operational.

During the field trip, Neenan architects were also able to point out some things the students could fix in their masterpiece. The students put together the project without having any guidelines for how much space a student takes up in a school. They based their measurements off of what they found in their old high school.

Because of that, their product is three times the size of what it should be, said Glaze. Their design measures 550,000 square feet, enough space for a capacity of 3,000 students. Glaze said he discussed with students other elements in design, such as the cost of materials. The students' design would cost \$60 million to build.

But Glaze said he's impressed with what the students did include in their project - and how they went about it.

It all started in September, when Mathis' second-year students had to decide on what they wanted their project to be.

"I like them to channel their efforts in something they're interested in," said Mathis.

The students had noticed their existing school had aged and was "falling apart," said Johnson.

"This project came up as a joke," Squier said.

But the more they talked about it, the more they decided it was actually a good idea. They also decided to collaborate.

Mathis said he's never had a class that has attempted such an endeavor before. In addition, his expertise is in domestic design, not commercial.

"These people kind of surprised me when they came in and wanted to do this, and I looked at them like they had four eyes or something ... but I said you know what, go I ahead," said Mathis. "I was really impressed."

Extensive research

Under the direction of their teacher, the students interviewed every staff member, including cooks, janitors, and the principal, about what they wanted in a school.

"It wasn't really hard," said 18-year-old Kelly Byczkowski, the only female in the group. "The teachers got really into it. The teachers were really cooperative."

The students then compiled the research and began "space planning" - discussing the placement of what should go where. Nicolaus, Squier, Byczkowski, and Johnson, along with Josh Holloway, Brandon Steele, and Zach Mueller each worked on an area, and then collaborated to bring the building together.

"It's been quite a challenge," said Mathis.

The students interviewing process and research impressed Glaze, who said it showed they were "in tune" to what the school and community needed and wanted. It also showed they have the ability to look at what was around them and try to improve it.

At the same time the students were working on their project, the school board was looking at the school themselves. Mathis says he didn't realize that was happening until he saw a newspaper article about the Neenan Company's facility study.

"I brought that newspaper in the next day, and I said, 'Look folks, what would you think if your building got built,'" said Mathis.

"And then he said, 'You better start working hard,'" Johnson quickly added.

Now, the teens are trying to scale their project down to where it should be - 175,000 feet. They gather around the design attached to the wooden board, measuring rooms and consulting one another before returning to work on their laptops. Most of the seniors are either sure they want to become architects, or are thinking about it.

"It was work, but we learned a lot," said Steele.