

Former bowling facility proves to be right up charter school's alley

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OKLAHOMA CITY – Converting an old bowling alley into an elementary school in a two-month window was no easy task for one Oklahoma charter school. But officials made it happen

Dove Science Academy Elementary opened in August at 415 NE 48th St. after the school received approval to start from the Oklahoma City Public Schools earlier in the year.

The elementary is the third school to open under the Dove umbrella for alternative college preparatory public schooling run by the non-profit Sky Foundation, which was established in Stillwater in 1999.

Dove Science Academy at 919 NW 23rd St., started in 2001 for students in grades six through eight. The first group included 250 students. That school now has classes for grades six through 12 with an enrollment of 400.

The Dove Science Academy Tulsa at 280 Memorial Dr., started in 2000 for grades six through eight. That school now also offers grades six through 12 and has grown from an initial 218 students to about 400.

In December 2007, the foundation began plans for an elementary school in Oklahoma City for Kindergarten through fifth grade.

The school's board turned to Anna Conrady, broker associate with Baker First Commercial Real Estate, to help them look for a new building.

Conrady had been instrumental in helping the school find its first Oklahoma City Building.

But a lease wouldn't be necessary without a school.

"We saw this building in January but couldn't sign a lease because they didn't know if they'd be approved," she said.

Dove Elementary was approved by the OCPS on Feb. 18. Conrady said a lease was signed with Gardner Realty Properties in June and she brought in Alliance Property Development an arm of Baker First Commercial, to turn the deserted building on Lincoln Boulevard into a school by the beginning of August.

Kristen Snethen , project manager with Alliance called the renovation quite an undertaking.

The project which cost about \$650,000, had to be completed and have a certificate of occupancy by Aug. 1 if it was to open as a school.

“If they didn’t have their certificate of occupancy by August 1 they couldn’t open for the entire year,” Snethen said. “It was a make it or don’t make it kind of day.”

The building presented several challenges, especially for a company that usually builds office spaces.

Snethen said the bowling lanes were long gone, but the design did lend itself to its original use.

“When you walked in there was a huge drop-off and we couldn’t figure out what it was for at first, then we were told it was a bowling alley, and you could tell where the lanes were and it all made sense,” she said.

In addition to raising the floor and building 18 classrooms, the design also had to include some safety features to keep things like thermostats and door locks out of reach of little hands.

The design also had to include things like cubbyholes for students to stash their belongings; items that Snethen said are usually not something they plan for with office clients.

The 20,488-square-foot building was constructed in the 1950’s.

With the clock ticking crews worked for weeks late into the night to have the school ready in time.

“We were in there finishing everything up until the day before school started,” Snethen said.

Hasan Suzuk, principal of DSA elementary, said his 22 teachers worked until midnight each day from Aug. 4-20. “We were worried if we could have it ready on time,” he said.

As inspectors walked through the building in August the finishing touches were still being added.

The school can accommodate 300 children and has an enrollment of about 270. But until the last minute it looked like the children might have a nice school building, although maybe not a place to sit. Fortunately everything came together and the students were none the wiser. “One Wednesday afternoon at 4p.m. the chairs arrived at the school and Thursday morning the students came in,” Suzuk said. Snethen said the extensive renovation touched every bit of space to create something that in the end didn’t resemble a bowling alley in the least. “It was a complete overhaul,” she said. “We gutted most of it.”