

## New schools can be ‘godsend,’ headache

By **MELISSA GRIFFY SEETON**  
**REPOSITORY EDUCATION WRITER**

CANTON When Ann Bartley got up for work Feb. 20, she never dreamed she’d be living out one of her favorite books.

But the Worley School principal found her office was swamped — literally. It smelled musty, her steps made a squishy noise when she walked, and it appeared Mike Thaler’s “The Principal from the Black Lagoon” had become a reality.

“I brought boots and thermals because it was so cold and wet,” said Bartley.

The leaking roof on the 3-year-old school on 23rd Street NW had let go during the Presidents Day holiday, dumping gallons of water through the ceiling onto her floor, onto her achievement test data, and even onto her favorite book.

“It’s mind-blowing,” she said.

School districts across the state participating in the Ohio School Facilities Commission program have found problems with new buildings under the \$5.6 billion (and growing) program. Collapsed walls, toppling windows and major structural deficiencies have shown up in new schools from Marietta to Toledo, Dayton and Cleveland.

The commission has had its share of problems, too. In its nine years, it has gone through four directors, recently naming its fifth, former state Sen. Mike Shoemaker of Ross County. Its first director, Randall A. Fischer, resigned in 2002 after revelations that he got golf outings and free meals from contractors who did school-construction work for the state.

Locally, a dozen school districts have commission-funded building programs under way or proposed. Many are projects that have or will have renovated or replaced every aging building in a district, and many never would have been done without the state program.

“It was a godsend for Alliance,” said Alliance City Schools Superintendent Stephen Stohla. “What we have now is a better environment for teaching and a better environment for kids.”

The problems with this construction program, he added, are similar to those “with any other project.”

But some maintain the structure of the state program is contributing to the problems.

### WIN SOME, LOSE SOME

When Tad Ellsworth started as business manager for Canton City Schools in 2004, he inherited new school



buildings with roofs already in need of repair.

The Canton districtwide rebuilding project was one of the first state-funded projects in Ohio, beginning in 1999. “The state,” Ellsworth said, “learned from mistakes made here.”

One major issue arose when the state pushed the city district to close Souers Middle School after raising concerns about declining enrollment. The state also tried to cut the overall scope of Canton’s project by saying it needed less space.

Canton’s response was to redefine some elementary school boundaries and keep sixth-graders in the elementary buildings.

“Elementaries are the foundation of our neighborhoods,” Ellsworth said. “When you build a school, you are looking at what the community needs — it isn’t just about a rule of thumb.”

Since the beginning of the project, the city district has paid nearly \$10 million more than it originally anticipated, and the state has paid about \$5 million less.

Still, the state commission — which put up 72 percent of the total cost — controls the project.

“It’s amazing how it’s happened,” Ellsworth said. “We feel there may be better ways of using space, but the OSFC feels if you want to do that — you pay for it.”

When the state calculated Canton’s needs, the commission added McKinley and Timken high schools’ enrollment together, and declared the city had enough high school space already. It didn’t want to provide money for an addition at the crowded McKinley.

So, to handle the overcrowding and keep the high schools separate, the district is paying about \$6 million of the \$15 million 10-phase construction project, which is to be completed next summer.

How much should be built isn’t the only conflict between local people and the state commission.

The commission’s rulebook, the Ohio School Design Manual, outlines what kind of materials schools can use in construction and renovation, and local officials say it’s often on the cheap.

Gone are the durable and visually pleasing terrazzo floors; in are vinyl composition tiles that can scuff and curl. Instead of glazed wall tiles, schools have painted blocks. Canton wanted, and got, wooden floors in its gyms — but paid extra for it.

“Sometimes, we win,” Ellsworth said. “Sometimes, we lose.”

## BARE BONES

Summit School was dedicated in September without many of the furnishings that help a school function. Canton officials said the commission under-budgeted construction costs and that cut into money schools planned to spend on things such as shelves, desks and swings.

Construction budgets set by the state in 1999 and 2000 fell short in many other school districts across the state — that’s because the schools were built about seven years after the budgets were set. The cost of construction labor and supplies increased, while commission money paid to districts remained largely stagnant.

The state, for example, moved square feet from plans for McGregor School to those for Harter, forcing the

district to convert what was to be a special-education room into a classroom at McGregor. When they moved to the new McGregor in December, some teachers were already talking about how small the building is.

And it's not just McGregor that's operating in tight quarters; Worley School is tight, too.

"Would I have designed it differently? Sure," Ellsworth said.

The state wants quality schools, he added, but local people understand local needs better. Still, "despite all of our frustrations, we would have none of this without the OSFC."

## RESOLVING PROBLEMS

And, according to Canton's progress reports, construction problems are much less severe here than in other districts across the state.

Canton is involved in litigation with one contractor, Stanley Miller Construction, in the state Court of Claims because the district will not pay more than what it agreed upon during the bidding process.

There have been other issues, too. Problems occurred during Hartford Middle School's renovation with the heating and air-conditioning systems, grounding of the cable tray, and power problems with cameras and speaker systems. It took the contractor, ASCC of Pittsburgh, nine months after students occupied the building to get the technology straightened out.

Some of the 38-unit ventilators Gene's Refrigeration of Medina installed had to be replaced because of air leaks, and the Ruhlin Company — the district's state-appointed construction management firm — is still working with Gene's to pay its subcontractors.

Ruhlin is working with contractors on masonry problems at McGregor School, too.

Progress reports also document an instance at Summit School when a contractor forgot to get a city permit before final inspection rolled around. And, at Harter School last month, water leaked around a wall sconce. The roof also leaked.

David Krutz, project executive for the Ruhlin Company, said his company is working with contractors to fix the problems.

Krutz, who is helping to oversee the OSFC project in Akron City Schools, said Canton City has been lucky in that it hasn't had any major problems.

"You have your good guys and not-so-good guys, but, by and large, the contractors in this area have been great," he said.

## MYSTERY ILLNESS, UNUSUAL PROBLEMS

About 20 teachers and custodians have come down with an unexplained illness at Allen School.

There's no single symptom, but related ones include recurring headaches and upper respiratory, bronchial and sinus infections. Some teachers have experienced breathing problems, especially shortness of breath, while in their classrooms.

The suspected link: The new school building with a leaking roof that opened in 2003.

Black mold has been ruled out. New air-quality tests are under way, though those for known allergens and

mold have come back negative. One company even told school officials the air is the cleanest they've tested.

"We are still in the process of elimination, and trying to find out exactly what we are dealing with," said Rosalind Henderson, Allen's principal. "You almost learn by trial and error."

Sam Dorto, president of the Canton Professional Educators Association, said he's concerned.

"Sixty years ago they didn't think asbestos was harmful," Dorto said. "That's the scary thing — we may not have a test for what is making people sick."

The teachers union has asked that precautionary measures be taken during renovation at McKinley High School — which happens largely during the school day — to avoid repeating, for example, the time dust filled the cafeteria while students were eating.

A more severe problem arose when a ground wire came loose in the elevator at McKinley, shocking people inside.

Ruhlin's Krutz said the problem was fixed that day.

Dorto acknowledged the elevator incident was unusual, but "there are just so many common issues with a good number of our new buildings." The pattern, he said, "isn't just unique to Canton."

## OTHER LOCAL PROBLEMS

Thomas Mayberry, a Northwest Local Schools board member, said problems with his district's construction include leaks, incorrectly poured footers, and a wall that fell during construction damaging plumbing — costing the district more than \$21,000.

But that's not all: Tiles in the gym and the cafeteria lifted because of the moisture under the floor, the cooling unit on the roof had to be replaced because it wasn't properly grounded, and the floor cracked in the performing arts hall.

Public records document thousands of dollars in change orders (changes in plans, specifications and costs that come after construction begins). Those changes included replacing water-damaged ceiling tile, meeting electrical codes not on electrical drawings, and modifying columns after anchor bolts were set in the wrong place.

"I was only there one time and that's all it took for me," said Mayberry, who was upset by the construction.

Louisville City Schools participated in an expedited plan with the state — meaning the district could start work and pay for its share of the building plan while awaiting state funding.

Problems the district has encountered so far have been relatively minor, Superintendent Clyde Lepley said, such as redoing the finish on the wooden gym floor at the Middle School.

Still, others are learning to live with the problems. Valerie Pack, the new principal of Canton's Lehman Middle School, has been dealing with roof leaks, including one that displaced the band from its room two weeks ago. She's seen retaining walls come apart at the school, fascia replaced, and custodians forced to reglue molding along the base of the interior walls.

Said Pack of the problems:

"I was like, 'Are you kidding me?'"

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area state-Funded school building Projects

Alliance City Schools

Canton City Schools

Carrollton Exempted Village Schools (not yet funded)

Fairless Local Schools

Green Local Schools

Louisville City Schools

Massillon City Schools

Minerva Local Schools

Northwest Local Schools

Osnaburg Local Schools

Sandy Valley Local Schools

Tuslaw Local Schools

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