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# School Transformation

## Buildings adapted to serve community

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07/11/2003

### NOTE:

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Gateway Academy sits empty off Britton Road. The lawn of the former school is spotted with weeds and the paint on the building's trim is chipped, but soon the eyesore will be transformed into a community center.

A new program called Neighborhoods Engaged in School Transformation is taking closed school buildings and reopening them to serve the community.

"We've seen a wonderful response from the community," said Jennifer Seaton, spokeswoman for the United Way of Metro Oklahoma City.

"Citizens feel like they are valued. They feel like they've been taken care of and they haven't been left behind or forgotten."

The program is a partnership between several organizations including the United Way, Oklahoma City Public Schools and the Community Action Agency.

MAPS for Kids calls for 12 schools to close, Oklahoma City Public Schools spokeswoman Sherry Fair said. Budget constraints have forced the district to speed up the process.

"In light of the budget crisis, seven schools will close next fall," Fair said.

The seven schools to close this fall are Gateway Academy, Harding Middle School, Star Elementary, Lafayette Elementary, Shields Heights Elementary, King Elementary and Creston Hills Elementary.

With permission of the school board, a closed school can be sold or leased or it can be left alone with minimum security. In the Neighborhoods Engaged in School Transformation program, the district leases the school to a community center at a discounted rate.

Dealing with old school buildings is sometimes a challenge for the district, especially with many closing at the same time, Fair said, so the opportunity to recycle them is a big help.

The Neighborhoods Engaged in School Transformation program, with the help of an agency called Possibilities, surveys the surrounding community to gauge its needs. Armed with that information, the program repairs the old school and equips it to serve the community's needs.

Garden Oaks Elementary, 3401 NE 16, was the first school in the program. The former school now houses a mobile book rack, two case workers and meeting space for a neighborhood association, Seaton said.

"The beauty of Garden Oaks is everyone working together to find the best solution," she said.

Bob Spinks, executive director of United Way of Metro Oklahoma City, said community input is what makes the program succeed.

"We learned the Community Action Agency had several requests to provide space for neighborhood picnics and a number of other activities, but they simply didn't have room at their old location," Spinks said.

Because it likes the results from the Garden Oaks project, the Neighborhoods Engaged in School Transformation program plans to convert other abandoned schools in the same manner.

"We're excited because we've seen it work and now we can go forth with confidence," Seaton said.

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