



Tomas Ovalle / The Fresno Bee

A balloon arch and Principal Andrew Manouelian welcome Chase, 7, and Kevin Rindlisbacher, 10, to the first day of school Wednesday at Fresno's Harvest Elementary.

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Harvest Elementary opens its doors

By Eddie Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

The day was long awaited, and the anticipation only grew as the clock ticked down Wednesday morning.

A crowd of parents and children began gathering shortly after 7 a.m. in front of Harvest Elementary School in northwest Fresno, eager to see the new campus and start the new school year.

Finally, at 7:50 a.m., principal Andrew Manouelian told the crowd, "Welcome to Harvest." A collective "Yea!" rang out as the doors opened to Central Unified School District's newest elementary school.

Manouelian, staff members, cheerleaders and an arch of balloons -- orange, blue and white, the school's colors -- greeted the elated children and parents as they streamed through the main entrance.

Work was still being done on cabinets, the library, landscaping and elsewhere on the campus, but Manouelian said the classrooms were ready for teachers and students.

Janet Smith said her son and daughter -- fourth-grader Joshua and sixth-grader Tylo, a cheerleader -- were looking forward to attending their new school.

"They were kind of nervous, but it was a good nervous," Smith said.

Maria Quintana said her sixth-grade daughter, Haeliegh -- also a cheerleader -- was so eager to come to school that she woke up at 4 a.m.

"We've been driving by all summer," Quintana said. "Every couple of weeks, we came by and watched the school being built."

Harvest, on West Gettysburg Avenue, is the third of five projects planned for Deran Koligian Education Complex. Money for the Harvest campus, Koligian Stadium and a transportation center came from a \$40 million bond measure approved by Central Unified voters in 2003, plus state matching funds and developer fees.

That pot of money also will pay for a junior high school, tentatively scheduled to open in fall 2010. Central Unified officials hope the complex also will be the site of the district's next high school. A bond measure that officials want to place on the ballot in 2008 would help pay for the high school.

Mike Berg, Central Unified's associate superintendent/chief business officer, said the goal is to open the new high school within the next four years.

Berg said construction of the Harvest campus was on a tight schedule because the \$14 million project was delayed two months. The land is part of a fig orchard that was under a fruit fly quarantine.

The school was completed in 13 months.

About 425 students attended classes Wednesday. Manouelian said the campus can accommodate 850 students.

Central Unified Superintendent Marilou Ryder called Wednesday's Harvest opening "a great day for families and kids."

The fast-growing district increased by 800 students last year and expects an additional 350 to enroll this year, Ryder said.

The district's total enrollment is about 13,400.

The reporter can be reached at ejimenez@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6386.



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Ashtyn Bracamonte and other Harvest Elementary School cheerleaders welcome students to the first day of school Wednesday. Harvest Elementary is a brand new Central Unified school on Gettysburg Avenue west of Highway 99.