



To expedite the construction process, officials at Merced County, Calif., opted for a modular approach when building its new alternative Valley Community School in Atwater. Photo by DuMor

A Better Alternative

A quickly built campus in Atwater, Calif., provides a new home for its at-risk program.

BY MIKE KENNEDY

Education officials in Merced County, Calif., had wanted for years to find a more suitable home for the alternative school campus the county runs in Atwater. The county's alternative school campuses in Merced and Los Banos had permanent campuses, but for more than a decade, the Atwater site was housed in makeshift leased space in a shuttered hospital on what used to be the Castle Air Force Base. Enrollment

was limited to about 120.

Finding a suitable site proved difficult, says Jaime Quintana, facilities planner with the Merced County Office of Education, which oversees the alternative school program. The county secured funding for a new campus in 2008, Quintana says, but the bureaucratic hurdles of winning approval for a site, including the opposition of community members who didn't want a school with at-

risk clientele in their neighborhoods stalled plans.

When the county finally was able to win approval for a 10-acre site for a new Atwater campus, it needed to move quickly to have the school open for students for the 2011-12 year.

"What usually takes two years, we did in eight months," says Quintana. "I lost a lot of hair, but we were able to get it done."

The \$19 million Valley Community

School Atwater Campus welcomed students in August 2011 with a four-wing classroom building, administrative offices, and art and science labs. The campus also has a gymnasium, shop area, childcare facilities and athletic fields. It has capacity for about 200 students—most are in high school, but some are in middle school.

“It’s a prototype for the future,” Quintana says.

PERMANENT CONSTRUCTION

To expedite the construction process, the county opted for a modular approach. Despite the preconceptions of some about modular buildings as a stop-gap and less than ideal space

solution, Quintana emphasizes that there is nothing temporary or lacking in quality about the new school.

“Portable classrooms might last 10 to 20 years, but this type of modular construction is long-lasting. These buildings are constructed to last 50 years, like a traditionally built school,” he says.

Walls and other elements of the Atwater campus were manufactured in a factory and delivered to the school site, where they were fastened together. Poured concrete floors and steel framing are some of the building elements that are expected to give the Atwater campus a longer lifespan than other kinds of modular classroom space,

Quintana says.

The new classrooms offer a learning environment much improved from the one that students left behind at the former base hospital. A key factor in improving the climate was a focus on sustainability—erecting a campus in Atwater that is environmentally friendly and uses energy efficiently.

“The whole intent was to create a greener environment,” says Quintana. “The school is designed to use 30 percent less energy than what the state standards are.”

Among the green features:

- The design enables classrooms to be illuminated with daylight, which studies have shown is beneficial to

The advertisement features a large photograph of a green metal park bench in a park setting. In the background, a person is operating a green tractor. A sign for 'THE WALL PARK' is visible. The image is presented as if it's a Polaroid print, with a white border and a shadow effect. The text 'Du Mor® SITE FURNISHINGS' is printed in a red serif font in the upper right corner of the image area. Below the image, a red banner contains the slogan 'Quality that endures.' in a white serif font.

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student performance. The bright surroundings are a significant change from the dark learning spaces found in the old hospital. Lighting controls at the new campus adjust illumination levels so that artificial lights are used only when needed.

- Photovoltaic panels installed on Atwater's school awnings provide solar energy to power the campus. The Merced Irrigation District, the local energy utility, provided the Atwater school with a \$70,000 rebate for installation of the 26-kilowatt system. The system is projected to save \$5,800 a year in energy consumption.

- Cool roofing prevents solar heat gain.

- Recycled materials are used, including recycled denim as building insulation.

- A thermal displacement ventilation system controls the climate more efficiently and creates a classroom environment that is more conducive to learning. The builder states that classrooms with the ventilation system have 50 percent less noise than a typical classroom.

The California Energy Commission's Public Interest Energy Research Program says the advantages of thermal displacement ventilation include "better acoustics, greater energy efficiency, excellent ventilation effectiveness and cleaner and more healthful air."

OFFERING AN ALTERNATIVE

The learning environment is especially important for the students who attend the Atwater campus. They come from other districts in Merced County and generally are students who have been expelled or have dropped out from traditional schools, teen-aged parents or others who haven't been able to prosper in a traditional school environment.

According to state statistics from 2010-11, 91 percent of the students at the Atwater campus are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. English language learners make up 43 percent of the student body.



The Valley Community School in Atwater has a smaller campus setting, designed specifically for educating at-risk students. Photos by DuMor

"There are quite a few problems with gangs and drugs," says Quintana. "The goal is for students to return to the school they came from, but that is not usually the case."

Being able to offer those students a school setting designed specifically for educating at-risk students—a smaller campus that is more welcoming and aesthetically pleasing than where they

had been—may help Merced County get those struggling students back on track academically and socially.

“The layout of the campus puts more focus on education,” Quintana says. “There is a central campus courtyard for students to gather. The colors of the buildings are muted earth tones.”

So far, the students have given the new campus thumbs up.

“You’re a product of your environment,” says Quintana. “The new school has changed students’ attitudes. They have reacted well to it.”

And now that those living nearby can see the finished campus, they are happy to have the school as a neighbor.

“The campus is a diamond in the rough,” says Quintana. “You won’t appreciate what it’s really like until you see it.” ■



Benches provide outdoor gathering spots for students at Valley Community School's Atwater campus. Photo by DuMor

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ON THE WEB

Read the related article about modular facilities, “Piece by Piece in School Construction,” at ASUmag.com.

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