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Winston Knolls School for students with autism moving from Hoffman Estates to new campus in Elgin --- 7/14/2022

By Mike Danahey



The new Elgin campus for Winston Knolls School provides a free-standing building and lots of space for nature and play activities for its students with autism, officials said. (Winston Knolls Foundation / HANDOUT)

A school for children and young adults with autism is relocating from a Hoffman Estates office park to site in Elgin with a more campus-like setting and a more school-like experience for students and staff, officials said.

Val Belmonte, CEO and president of The Winston Knolls Foundation in Barrington, said the new Winston Knolls School location at 1500 Executive Drive is close to Interstate 90 and Route 31 and in a spot that's ideal for their purposes.

"We saw so many buildings, and this one is perfect. It's a beautiful building," Belmonte said.



Winston Knolls School Principal Robert Lee shakes hands with a parent at a building dedication ceremony for their new location at 1500 Executive Drive in Elgin, near Interstate 90 and Route 31. (Winston Knolls Foundation / HANDOUT)

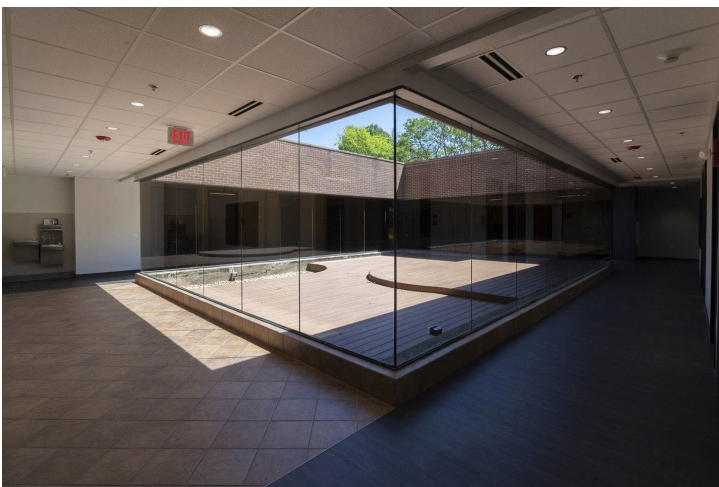
Winston Knolls Principal Robert Lee also said it will be unique in that they won't be sharing the space with any other company or organization.

"I've spent my career in education, and very, very few schools like ours have standalone buildings," Lee said.

Work to convert the space — previously home to K40 Electronics and IHC Construction Co. — began in July 2021. They plan to move in July 28, Lee said.

The new campus has an activities field and a specially designed playground enclosed by the walls of an exterior courtyard, Belmonte said. More outdoor space will increase nature and play-based experiences, which help develop social skills, Lee said.

The school's second floor will include a gym and a large multipurpose space that can be configured for physical education activities, after-school events and celebrations, he said.



An enclosed outdoor play area is part of the new Winston Knolls School building at 1500 Executive Drive in Elgin. (Winston Knolls Foundation / HANDOUT)

“The new building reinforces programming we already have in place,” Lee said.

He is also happy the new site features a private parking lot without through-traffic and a closed loop system for student drop-off and pickup.

“With students coming to us by bus, private cabs and cars, this solves a logistics issue we have at our current (2353 Hassell Road) location,” Lee said.

Winston Knolls is approved by the Illinois State Board of Education as nonpublic special education center that provides specialized education, therapeutic services and transitional training for children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other related special needs. It is one of 154 programs of its kind in Illinois, Belmonte said.

They work with students from 30 school districts throughout Chicago’s collar counties, **Elgin-based District U-46** being its biggest client, he said.

Students can range in age from 3 to 21. They expect to have 47 when the new school year begins Aug. 24, Belmonte said.

The Elgin site is large enough to accommodate a maximum of 75 to 80, about 15 to 20 more than the Hoffman Estates space, Belmonte said. Twenty staff members work directly with students, including teachers, paraeducators, speech and occupation therapists, nurses and physical education instructors.



Val Belmonte is the CEO and president of Barrington-based The Winston Knolls Foundation, the group responsible for the Winston Knolls School for autistic children and young adults, which is moving to a new location in Elgin. (Winston Knolls Foundation / HANDOUT)

Winston Knolls' programming is designed to develop skills that give students as much independence as possible, Belmonte said. The goal is to get them to the point where they can be part of the regular school system.

"Getting someone back to their school district, that's a success story for us," Belmonte said.

Lee said the new location will help give staff, students and families a sense of community and belonging.

"It's bigger, and it's special," Lee said.