Children’s Center earns award

I appreciate the opportunity to give you another update on our Bond Measure I progress. For the last several months I’ve been detailing the ways we have put to use the $180 million made possible by voters in 2006.

One of the improvements I’ve touched on is the addition to the Children’s Center Lab on the Santa Maria campus. This $6.5 million project will add about 8,900 square feet of new space and increase the number of students and children that the center will be able to serve.

We’ve received exciting news since I first told you about the project—the Children’s Center Lab has been awarded the designation of “demonstration site” by the Outdoor Classroom Project.

Funded by the Orfalea Foundation, the Outdoor Classroom Project is based on research that shows that children can benefit greatly from structured play activities in a more natural environment.

The Children’s Center is the first demonstration site to be designated in Santa Maria, and the award couldn’t be more timely.

The construction of the expansion is scheduled to begin in early 2011, and with it an opportunity for the entire playground to be remodeled and new components built that will better put into practice the Outdoor Classroom Project’s philosophies.

Already, aspects of the current playground have been changed and improved. From a typical playground with plastic and metal equipment to a more natural setting complete with a garden, mud pit and more room to run, the new facility will be state-of-the-art.

The new play facility will also include a larger garden complete with a small vineyard, bike path, rocks and tree stumps for the children to climb and no plastic, whatsoever.

Thesa Roepke, interim director of the Children’s Center Lab, explained that an added advantage of complying with the standards of the Outdoor Classroom Project is that the new playground will be more environmentally friendly and much less expensive than a standard playground.

The Allan Hancock College Children’s Center Lab has always been committed to staying current in the field of children’s studies, and the lab’s commitment to the Outdoor Classroom Project is just the latest example.

This is a whole new way of approaching the task of educating preschool age children and one that our staff is more than ready to implement. It is a best practices model that will prepare our students in the field of early childhood studies.

She told me, “We have the responsibility to provide our college students with the latest and greatest research-based practice. Employers want to hire people with experience implementing outdoor learning practices.”

I couldn’t agree more.

Above all, the Children’s Center Lab is exactly that—a learning lab. It is a place where our students can learn the best ways to teach, to reach children and to put new approaches into practice each and every day.

The new facility will support our students even more by providing a state-of-the-art learning lab for our large and active early childhood studies (ECS) degree and certificate programs. It will also expand enrollment for children ages 3 months to 5 years.

In addition to the new and improved playground, builders will be adding two infant rooms with supporting office space, a kitchen, nursery and storage; one toddler room with supporting spaces; observation rooms for early childhood studies students; a 40-seat adult classroom; and a full service kitchen that can accommodate the preparation of three meals a day.

There will also be waiting rooms and a lobby that will allow visitors to meet with staff without entering the secure area where children are located. The new playground features separate yards for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

In keeping with the natural feel of the facility and with a thought to the future, we have also strived for sustainability. The building will be up to 12 percent above code in energy savings, with recycled content and low-emitting materials, lighting and environmental control systems and water efficient landscaping.

I want to thank the instructors and staff at the Children’s Center Lab for their hard work and dedication and of course the community, who continue to support Allan Hancock College.

Whether it is a degree in early childhood studies or another area of higher education, our goal is to help our students reach their goals with the opportunity to “start here, go anywhere.”

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