

A School for the Future



Building State-of-the-Art Surroundings for Students

By Nicole Achs Freeling

Things have changed since Lucas Cooke attended school. As Assistant Project Manager at Rod Cooke Construction, Inc. (RCCI), Cooke has seen his fair share of school construction projects. But while working on Robert W. Gilliard Elementary School in southeastern Mobile County, Cooke realized he would have loved to attend the school as a young pupil.

The 85,000-square-foot structure is touted as the latest and greatest in grade-school education. The library is equipped with a bank of student computers. A large cafeteria features a full kitchen with state-of-the-art cooking equipment. And instead of viewing film strips on old, rattling projectors, Gilliard students will watch their educational programs in a video-screening room, which is part of the school's media center.

The school also features a gymnasium with a stage for productions, a band room, and science classrooms with laboratories and oversized desks. The school will serve kindergarten through fifth-grade students. It will also include a prekindergarten unit for special-needs students.

"It's a clean, aesthetically pleasing building," says Cooke. "There is plenty of light, with light blue and green walls representing the school colors. It's very airy."

Meeting the Demand

With three classroom wings, an administrative wing, and an approximate 800-student capacity, Gilliard will meet the

district's growing need for space. The school can also compete for families seeking the best educational offerings for their children.

Construction of Gilliard is part of the largest building campaign in Mobile County Public School System history, through which it has spent \$375 million in the last nine years. Since 1996, the county has completed projects at 76 schools, including building 31 new ones. RCCI is an important player in this effort, completing some 15 to 20 high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools for the district.

Gilliard, a \$7.9-million project completed in November 2005, will serve the students living in the southern section of Dauphin Island Parkway between Interstate 10 and the Dog River Bridge. These students are currently zoned in two elementaries — Adelia Williams and South Brookley, aging facilities that are no longer up to the standards of today's top-notch schools. The schools' capacities are increasingly strained as more and more young families move into the booming Mobile suburb.

A "Dirty" Situation

According to Jobsite Superintendent Joe Warner, out of the dozens of school buildings he's worked on, this surprise-free project had one of the simplest designs. The school is a regular slab-on-grade building with concrete block walls and brick exterior. There are metal trusses and bar joists for the roof. "It's a really smooth job," says Warner. "We've had a lot of harmony, and it's a joy to work on." >>



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— Lucas Cooke,
Assistant Project
Manager, Rod Cooke
Construction, Inc.



The 85,000-square-foot school includes the latest educational amenities, such as a media center with a video-screening room.

Nevertheless, this project was not without unique challenges. The site's poor-quality soil would not support the building. To strengthen the foundation, RCCI trucked in thousands of yards of dirt to the site and loaded the pad. Eventually, the sheer weight of these dirt piles compressed the soil below, allowing construction to commence.

Once the load was in place, crews waited 60 days before beginning construction, during which time the soils underneath were constantly monitored. "We were able to do some site work, cutting roads, but we couldn't perform any building construction," says Cooke.

RCCI put dirt on half the site first, and when the soil underneath had adequately hardened, workers moved that dirt to the other half and began construction on the first section. "The dirt was probably piled 10 feet high and about 100 feet wide," says Cooke. "It took eight to 10 trucks running constantly over five days to remove it all."

RCCI was aware of the need to preload the soil and built it into the project's timeframe. But the preloading did take 15 days longer than expected, time crews had to make up later in the project.

It's a Fact

Jobsite Superintendent Joe Warner's home was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. So RCCI transferred him to another project, Vancleave Elementary, so he would be closer to his community to facilitate rebuilding efforts. Sonny Odom stepped in as Jobsite Superintendent to complete the Gilliard Elementary project.

Eaves and Fascia

Another unique aspect to the elementary school's construction is its system of eaves and fascia. Called Structavent, the system encompasses two pieces — the base and the cover — both of which are constructed of metal. Traditional fascia are made of wood and vinyl, which may lose integrity over time.

"Structavent is something schools have recently started implementing," says Cooke. "It is less time consuming than framing the fascia. The materials are more expensive, but the labor is less. It's a net-cost savings, and it looks great."

Fascia are usually framed by a carpenter working on behalf of either the contractor or a subcontractor. With Structavent, the base plate is installed by a steel erector, and the contractor fastens the cover onto it to complete the system.

Mother Nature's Intervention

While the project has gone smoothly overall, there were instances in which nature intervened. In September 2004, Hurricane Ivan pummelled Mobile, and the damage to the city virtually shut down the materials delivery to the jobsite.

Meanwhile, hurricane-related rains soaked the site, setting work back by approximately two weeks. "As you can imagine, it was extremely wet and muddy," says Cooke. "We were working on slabs and footings at that time. Again, in August, Hurricane Katrina disrupted the project for two weeks."

Another dilemma came in the form of a large, beautiful water oak that was slated for removal due to a planned driveway pour. "On the day it was supposed to come down, nature activists petitioned the school system in efforts to save the tree," recalls Cooke. Although it was somewhat costly to do, the driveway was ultimately rerouted, and the big tree was preserved. "It would've caused a major ordeal to cut it down, so I guess everyone ended up happy," says Cooke.

Building a Fresh Start

Students will pour into Gilliard's halls as soon as the building is completed. Students at Adelia Williams and South Brookley began the year at their old schools but will move in as soon as the new one is complete.

In an article in the Mobile County Register on July 24, 2005, Gilliard Principal Laura Anderson



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discussed the benefits of the new school. "We're a great combination because we're taking all the wonderful things from both schools and combining it into a new and even greater school. The kids are ecstatic and eager to move into the new facility. It's been exciting to see the building go up. But they're probably a little nervous about the change."

According to the district, students will stay with the same teachers and classmates after the move in order to make the transition as smooth as possible. ✱