

With new high school, educational choices return to downtown OKC

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OKLAHOMA CITY — John Rex Charter Schools is set to add a high school, giving it a pre-K through 12th grade educational pipeline in the heart of downtown Oklahoma City.

The move marks a complete return of educational choices to downtown, which saw its main high school, the historic Central High, close in 1981 before being sold to Southwestern Bell. The building is now home to OCU Law School while the only upper grades located downtown is at Emerson Alternative School.

That will change for the 2027 school year with John Rex Polytechnic High School set to open at 615 N Hudson Ave. Mayor David Holt praised the addition in an online posting in which he noted the John Rex addition brings a neighborhood high school back to downtown for the first time in 50 years.

Before the urban renewal era of the 1960s and 1970s, the greater downtown area was home to not just Central High, but also five elementary schools. Only one of those schools, Emerson, is still in use.

"Emerson Alternative School along North Walker provides a vital service to young people from across our city, but after the sale of Central High School, there was no longer a neighborhood public school in downtown," Holt wrote. "In the 1990s, OKC cast a vision for revitalizing downtown. For downtown to regain all the foundational elements of a community, it needed a neighborhood school again."

With the support of the Inasmuch Foundation and funded through MAPS for Kids (passed by voters in 1999), John Rex Elementary opened in 2014 at 500 W Sheridan Ave. The charter school district then opened an intermediate school at 428 W California Ave., and a junior high at 131 Dean A. McGee Ave.

The new high school will occupy an approximately 30,000-square-foot building that



The future home of John Rex Polytechnic High School, 615 N Hudson Ave., is shown in this rendering. PHOTO/USA TODAY NETWORK

will be renovated and reimaged to support what is being described by the district's superintendent as collaborative, interdisciplinary and applied learning. Once fully operational, it will accommodate up to 400 high school students.

"From the beginning, John Rex was built around the idea that an exceptional education can be deeply connected to the community around it," said superintendent Patrick Duffy. "Opening a high school allows us to take that vision even further. We're not simply adding four more grade levels. We're building a high school model uniquely designed around downtown Oklahoma City and the students who will graduate into our city's future."

John Rex Polytechnic High School is designed to combine rigorous academics with applied, real-world learning to prepare students for college, careers and life. Duffy said the district is building on more than a decade of experience using downtown Oklahoma City as an extension of the classroom.

He said the goal is for the high school to deepen connections with businesses, healthcare systems, universities, nonprofits and civic institutions, giving students opportunities to apply what they learn to real-world challenges.

A press release from the district explained

that under the polytechnic model, students will receive a comprehensive, college- and career-ready education while participating in interdisciplinary projects, applied learning and experiences connected to their interests and goals.

"Oklahoma City gives us an extraordinary environment in which to build this kind of school," said Dr. Rhonda Hart, founding principal of John Rex Polytechnic High School. "We want to connect students with the people and organizations solving real problems every day so they understand not only what they're learning, but how they can use it."

Oklahoma County Assessor records show the district bought the office building, built in 2001, for \$5,075,000 on Aug. 7. That price includes surface parking across the street on the north side of NW 6th St. The district also acquired a 3,500-square-foot empty lot immediately west of the building where a one-story presentation room doubling as an emergency shelter will be built.

As part of opening the new school, Duffy said the first enrollments will consist of current John Rex students who in 2027 will be entering the seventh through ninth grades. The seventh and eighth graders – 160 students – are currently being taught in temporary classroom space at Carnegie Center.

After the 2027 school year, Duffy said, a new permanent junior high location will be opened where the seventh and eighth grade will resume learning in space separate from high schoolers.

Duffy said the transition is aimed at creating the best possible culture at the high school while doing an extended grade by grade roll-out similar to what was started with the elementary.

Families wishing to enroll their students in the 2027 class for seventh through ninth grades at the new school will be given a chance to do so pending available openings and a lottery that will begin with an application process starting on Nov. 11.

Duffy said the school's academic model is being developed with both students' futures and the region's evolving workforce in mind. Oklahoma Employment Security Commission projections show STEM occupations statewide growing faster than employment overall through 2032, with projected growth in computer science, life sciences and engineering — fields reflected in the high school's planned academic concentrations.

Students will choose from six areas of concentration:

- Engineering: Applying design, technology and problem-solving to real-world challenges.

- Cybersecurity and computer science: Exploring computer science, cybersecurity and emerging technologies.

- Biomedical sciences: Connecting rigorous science with health, medicine and Oklahoma City's healthcare and research community.

- Entrepreneurship: Developing the creativity, leadership and practical skills to move ideas into action.

- Interdisciplinary studies: Connecting ideas across academic disciplines through inquiry, collaboration and applied problem-solving.

- Advanced academics: A college-focused concentration offering advanced and concurrent coursework, with opportunities to work toward an associate degree while completing high school.

"We have an opportunity to help students see themselves as part of Oklahoma City's future before they ever leave high school," said Jennifer Monies, John Rex Charter Schools board chair. "Whether they ultimately become engineers, healthcare professionals, entrepreneurs, technology leaders or pursue a path we haven't imagined yet, we want them to graduate knowing how their talents can contribute to this community and beyond. We are building a high school to meet the future needs of our city."