



Challenger Center to have new home in District 200

The Challenger Learning Center for Science and Technology became part of Woodstock Community Unit School District 200 Tuesday night ensuring that space missions will endure in Woodstock for area students across northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin.

The Board of Education voted to approve the District administration's recommendations to accept the donation of the center from Aurora University Woodstock Center and relocate it to Olson Elementary School over the summer.

The Woodstock center is one of only 40 centers across the nation, 12 of which are located within public schools. Since 2001 when the center opened in Woodstock, more than 160,000 students from schools and other organizations have participated in its educational programming.

District 200 Superintendent Mike Moan said space will be reallocated on the second floor of Olson Elementary in a way that will not disrupt classroom space and that renovations should be completed by the start of the school year. The facility is expected to open for outside groups in September.

"We're excited about the ability to keep this valuable facility here in Woodstock and thrilled with the educational possibilities for our students," Moan said. "There are no limits to what our creative staff can do to enhance science and technology learning by combining their skills with the national Challenger Center organization."

On average, students participate in about 300 space missions each year, generally two missions each school day. Schools from across McHenry County, the collar counties and beyond have consistently made Woodstock's Challenger Learning Center a field trip destination. A total of 313 space "Missions to Mars" were flown during the 2018-2019 school year.

In addition to those missions, the center holds summer camps and some evening science and technology education events for families. Through a combinations of grants and programming, the center generates revenue above \$300,000 totaling \$334,600 in fiscal year 2018.

At Tuesday night's meeting, Board of Education members discussed the importance of recreating the aesthetics of the Woodstock Challenger Learning Center at Olson School, particularly a distinct entrance. They plan to review architectural plans in the coming weeks.

“There are some really positive things that could come of this and ultimately it could be a great thing for us,” Board President Carl Gilmore said.

Aurora University officials said missions are already 80 percent booked for the 2019-2020 school year and believe visiting schools will continue scheduling trips to the new facility at 720 W. Judd St. instead of its current home at 222 E. Judd Street. The distance between the buildings is less than one mile.

Moan said the Challenger Learning Center will continue to operate in the same manner that has kept it in a strong financial position, but District 200 staff will likely expand programming, certainly offering more access for District 200 students and families. It has strong potential to further the District’s goal of increasing family and community engagement, he said.

District officials said the space at Olson Elementary, which is now mainly occupied by unused locker rooms, will be renovated to fit the footprint of the existing space mission program. The equipment will be relocated and installed with the assistance of national Challenger Center staff.

The estimated cost of the renovation to Olson is \$440,000, and Aurora University has agreed to provide District 200 with a \$340,000 cash contribution to be used to offset those costs. The remainder will be recuperated through the revenue from mission fees and grants.

The District 200 Challenger Learning Center is expected to have one full-time employee to run the center and some part-time employees as mission instructors. District staff will likely be reallocated for the full-time position.

The estimated operating cost for District 200 including staff, an annual membership fee to the National Challenger Center program, marketing, software and updates is about \$180,000.

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