

Kinkaid nears expansion goal

\$180M campaign to fund new buildings, programs as well as faculty, aid

By Elizabeth Sander STAFF WRITER



Photos by Jon Shapley/Staff photographer

Kinkaid's new upper school will be double the size of the previous one, with updated classrooms that value collaboration.

Only two things stand between the Kinkaid School and its future: 450,000 Old Texas bricks in the color Rosio Buff and \$42 million more in funding.

The private school nestled on 34.5 acres in Piney Point Village is in the midst of a historic \$180 million fundraising campaign, the largest of any private school in this region of the United States, according to Tom Moore, the school's director of advancement.

"Essentially, this is our final master plan for Kinkaid campus. Literally every division and every department of the school is going to be impacted by this project," said Head of School Jonathan Eades, with construction on the new upper school well underway outside his office window.

The "All In" campaign is being called a legacy project for the school, which was founded in 1904 by Margaret Kinkaid. It should carry the school up to 100 years into the future, leadership has said. Their last campaign, which totaled \$47 million, finished in 2003.



Director of Advancement Tom Moore said Kinkaid's campaign is the largest of any private school in the region.

The four-year campaign that began in October 2022 is already three-quarters to its goal. Kinkaid joined an elite group of less than three dozen independent schools in the National Association of Independent Schools who have ever raised at least \$100 million in a single fundraising campaign.

Moore said he and the volunteer committee are confident that they will reach the \$180 million goal by fall 2026, meeting almost every day with families and potential donors (whom he stipulated must already have some connection to Kinkaid, as is protocol for private school fundraisers).



Jon Shapley/Staff photographer

Children walk between classes as construction continues on a campus expansion at the Kinkaid School. A new upper school, administration building and field house are planned.

Kinkaid already has a considerable endowment of \$130 million, allowing nearly \$4.5 million to be budgeted for financial aid this fiscal year, including support for tuition, computers, books, meals, uniforms and school supplies. Applications are need-blind at the school, meaning deserving students are admitted regardless of whether their families can afford full tuition, which will increase 5% to \$35,340 for 2024-25.

About 10% of Kinkaid's 1,469 students receive financial aid.

Adding new programs

The bulk of the campaign, \$143 million, will build a new upper school, an administration building and a field house, and \$8 million

will be divided among several new programs, including the Center for Leadership, Entrepreneurship and Finance; the Center for Wellbeing and Success; and the Center for STEM. An additional \$8 million will be used to expand financial aid and endow faculty positions and \$21 million will go toward long-term economic sustainability.

The new upper school will be double the size of the previous one that was torn down in September. That building, constructed in 1957, had "exceeded its useful life," Eades said. Alumni, students and teachers surveyed felt the classrooms were built for an outdated educational model, not with collaboration, movement and creativity in mind.

“The day of the teacher is the sage on the stage up front with pupils in neat little rows is a little bit dated,” Eades said.

The two-story half-circle high school will be connected by “sky-ways” to other buildings on campus and will feature natural light, private study rooms and larger, more flexible classrooms, Eades said, all to maximize learning potential.

With a project this size, the leadership has to think far into the future and ensure they maximize the current footprint of campus. After this campaign is complete, any new expansion or development would mean additional acreage or a new plot altogether.

In a school that’s already forward-thinking (they are proud owners of an anatomage table for virtual dissection that they use in the lower, middle and upper school curriculum), they have to think even farther into an educational world with more virtual reality, artificial intelligence and other advanced learning technologies.

“We’re designing science labs for the future, and making sure that we’re visionary, and we’re forward thinking, so that five to 10 years from now we’re not going to say, ‘Oh, we were kind of short-sighted,’” Eades said.

This has involved looking at private schools and universities across Texas and even the U.S. to see what long-lasting educational construction should look like on their campus. The new two-story STEM center will house a makerspace to support their new “Shark Tank”-type experience for students, which could involve a \$20,000 commitment from investors brought in from outside the school to support entrepreneurial projects. The Shark Tank experience will be part of the Center for Leadership, Entrepreneurship and Finance, an idea borne from alumni who felt like Kinkaid prepared them for college (100% of their students are accepted to a four-year institution), but didn’t provide adequate business acumen.

Part of this program that began this year, which is optional but highly encouraged for students, consists of a project where students have to pitch investments to the endowment board, and if they are accepted, they will have the opportunity to create and manage a specialized investment portfolio for \$100,000 of Kinkaid’s endowment, providing quarterly progress reports.

“There are not a lot of schools that are doing that. It’s not the old stock market game... it’s a real life application,” Eades said.

Beyond preparing students for STEM and business careers, leadership is doubling down on the commitment to mental health and students’ well-being.

The center will increase the counseling and other services already offered on campus, and will also seek to make the connection between well-being and success, and how in some ways, well-being is success, Eades said. The center was originally going to be for well-being and “student success,” but leadership decided to drop the word “student” so they can commit to providing programming for parents. They are planning lessons on how to approach raising children in the modern day, with topics like online safety and social media. Plus, the center will also provide programming and mental health support for staff.

“It’s hard being a teacher these days in a charged environment, and a lot is asked of them,” Eades said. “We want to make sure we’re taking care of our faculty.”

Growing pains

With construction of this scope, there were bound to be some growing pains, although the administration has worked to reduce them. Upper school students moved out of the previous building after the 2022-2023 school year, and relocated to a temporary upper school (referred to as “TUS”). Once the new upper school is finished, TUS will be used for lower school classrooms, a greenhouse, outdoor art space and administrative offices.

And for two years, there won't be a senior center on campus, which upset some upperclassmen, according to current sophomore Jack Susman, 16. He said the senior center was a perk that many Kinkaid students, including his older siblings, looked forward to.

“Throughout high school, everyone's pretty split apart but like, once you have that common ground to meet with everyone, I guess it just brings your grade together. I mean, that's what I've heard,” he said.

Jack will luckily have access to the new senior center when the upper school is complete, he said, so he's personally more saddened about losing the former upper school library. He recently wrote an opinion piece for the school newspaper about his peers missing the library, saying it had an “old vibe” to it and everyone pretty much loved the space. He hopes to get some of these “hangout spaces” back when the new building is complete, he said.

Jack said that despite this, the new upper school will be much nicer than the previous building, and he's excited to be the first class that graduates after it's complete.

“I'm going to feel special being a part of that,” Jack said. “It'll be like a full-circle moment, like starting in lower school and being a part of something that big will be nice.”

Another student journalist, Zoe An, 15, who joined for the “Rory Gilmore experience,” said she is excited for the new building, too, but she was sad that as a current freshman she didn't get to experience the old upper school building.

“In middle school, every time we'd get a small chance to walk by the upper school, we did and thought it was super cool,” Zoe said. It was a loss — or an “L,” as she put it — that they tore the building down before she and her peers were able to go there, she said.

In the meantime, students must walk a lot more, and the temporary upper school, while nice and new, doesn't have as much personality, she said. In anticipation of the new campus, Zoe looks at the 3D model of the new school in the student life building anytime she gets a chance.

She's also hopeful that the school will support increased diversity. She said she's the only Asian girl in her grade, and she hopes that the new center for well-being will provide increased support for diverse students.

Enrollment increase

The scope of construction may be large, but the school isn't planning a huge enrollment increase as a result. The current figures project a 7-8% increase over 14 years, officials said. This is somewhat on purpose to ensure that the classes remain small and that students can continue to get the academic and extracurricular experiences the school currently offers.

This moderate increase doesn't match the growing demand, though. Between last year and this year, applications are up 6%, and in the past couple years, they're up 8%, according to director of admissions Iris Bonet.

“We have a very large theater, and just even for me the eyeball test when we do open houses, I mean, it’s filled with people who are eager to learn about the school, which is exciting,” Eades said.

This is in part due to the “historical moment” of the campaign, Eades said. But it may have to do with surrounding factors, too.

In Houston’s largest public school district, HISD, 6,000 students left after the state takeover, creating a ripple effect of increased enrollment to charters, suburban ISDs and both religious and non-religious private schools across the city.

Then there’s the issue of state public school funding, which has not seen an increase in daily student allotment since 2019, and is currently \$4,000 below the nationwide funding per student average.

Kinkaid’s next-door neighbor, Spring Branch ISD, recently announced plans to cut \$35 million from its operating budget, which resulted in a mass firing of librarians, school closures and eliminating beloved programs. Parents are now pitching in their own funds to keep some of these programs alive.

Eades is aware of the pitfalls facing the educational system outside Kinkaid’s Old Texas Rosio Buff brick walls, but it reminds him to be grateful for the resources the school has at its disposal.

“It’s a commentary on how fortunate we are at Kinkaid and the passion that our students and alumni feel for this place,” Eades said. “(This campaign) is one of the more humbling and thrilling things I’ve been a part of in my professional career.”