

Phase 4 Construction Questions & Answers

Below are some answers to the most frequently asked questions about the HS Annex Building project.

Q. Why are we adding a High School Annex Building?

A. We have outgrown our existing space. The current grade 9 – 12 Learning Center was built for 400 students. We now have 413 students enrolled in our high school. In addition, we needed space dedicated for special education services. Currently those services are spread throughout the entire campus, and in some cases, located in areas designed for collaborative learning, not special education. We are also looking ahead and will need to accommodate the 8th graders transferring to the Gateway Prep high school from the future K – 8 grade Gateway School of Arts & Sciences to be located on land adjacent to the Gateway Prep Campus.

Q. Why do we need to grow enrollment? Many of us came to Gateway Prep because of its smaller size.

A. As a highly rated academic school offering UIL extracurricular programming, the demand to enroll in Gateway Prep far exceeds our initial enrollment Master Plan of 100 students per graduating class. The community surrounding our school is exploding with new homes, coinciding with the upcoming Westinghouse Road improvements, so demand is expected to multiply into the foreseeable future. In order to meet some of this demand, and yet keep our Gateway Prep elementary and middle school enrollment capped at our current numbers, the Governing Board decided to build a future grades K – 8 Gateway School of Arts & Sciences on the property we recently purchased just to the east of our existing Prep campus. With a planned maximum enrollment of 650 K – 8 students, we hope to open this school in 2025. This will be a totally separate school, with its own entrance, parking, buildings, administrators and faculty, and some different program offerings.

Q. What is the current wait list to get into Gateway Prep, and why do we need to get students off the waitlist?

A. Currently between 1,200 to 1,400 students are on the Gateway Prep waitlist at any given time throughout the school year. While we don't have a legal obligation to accommodate all the families that apply for enrollment, since 1995 the mission of Orenda Education has been "to create new and innovative school choice opportunities in Central Texas for families seeking an alternative to the large, more traditional public school system". We will continue to operate multiple campuses that meet a demand niche in a given location. In staying true to this mission, we expect to see our Orenda Charter School District enrollment continue to grow modestly over the coming years, as long as we continue to satisfy the families in our service area.

Q. Why has the initial plan to cap enrollment at 100 per graduating class changed?

A. The initial Master Plan for Gateway Prep School back in 2009 was for 400 elementary students (K – 4), 400 middle school students (5-8) and 400 high school students (9-12) with an average of 100 per graduating class. After about eight years of existence we had reached our enrollment goals for elementary and middle school, but our high school enrollment remained well below the goal of 400. A study of our transfers showed that only 62% of the graduating 8th graders continued on and through high school graduation at the Prep campus. There were several reasons for this, including that some of our middle school students wanted to go back to their assigned public high school because that school offered some

things Gateway Prep did not, such as certain electives - football or girls basketball for example. But the primary reason, based on exit surveys, was that they didn't intend to enroll in college after high school graduation, and did not want our rigorous college preparatory curriculum.

To address this and fill out our high school seats, we decided to increase our average graduating class size in the middle school to what is currently 138 per graduating class. This is our thirteenth year of existence, and for the first time in our history we reached our high school enrollment goal of 400 this school year because of that adjustment.

Q. After completion of the HS Annex Building and filling the new 350 HS seats, could the Gateway Prep School total enrollment get any larger in the future?

A. No. This is the last of the seat expansion we want, or can physically accommodate on this property. That is why our sponsoring entity, Orenda Education, made plans to build a new grade K – 8 Gateway School of Arts & Sciences on land adjacent to the Gateway Prep property in the next three years.

Q. The cafetorium is overcrowded with our current enrollment. What is the plan to expand seating?

A. We will expand the indoor dining area and seating during this Phase 4 construction.

Q. How are the additional 350 students who are going to be added to the high school going to be selected? Will it be the same lottery system, or will priority be given to athletes?

A. We will continue to follow the law for open-enrollment charter schools that requires a “blind lottery” to determine an applicant acceptance and wait list number. We have never considered any other criteria for acceptance into any of our charter school campuses other than what the law requires. Very few students enroll in our Gateway Prep high school unless they are coming from our Prep 8th grade graduation class. The additional 350 seats will be filled mostly from the new Gateway School of Arts & Sciences 8th graders coming over to Gateway Prep high school.

Q. What will be the individual class sizes for the MS and HS? We are currently above the state averages. We were told at the “Gator Bites” informational sessions that class sizes will be smaller than the state public school allowable.

A. All class sizes at all our Orenda Charter School District campuses are within the state's allowable averages as written in TEA regulations. The messaging at the Gator Bites session, and all other official communication about the Gateway Prep School has never communicated anything other than this.

Q. Rather than spend money on a new building, wouldn't it be better to pay our teachers more, or provide them with more resources?

A. People are our most valuable asset. We are extremely careful to balance the necessity to recruit and retain qualified teachers, offer extracurricular programming that enhances student development and have adequate space for learning, collaboration, and extracurricular activities. As a public charter school we have no taxing authority, receive fewer revenues than traditional public schools, and therefore must prioritize charitable fund raising to make up this large funding gap. The majority of our operating revenues comes from the state of Texas per pupil funding formula based on the school average daily attendance. Unlike traditional public schools, when the state does not increase per pupil funding to keep up with the cost of living, we can't go to the taxpayer and increase the tax rates to fill our coffers. If we don't grow

our revenues from enrollment growth, and charitable fundraising to help bridge this gap, we eventually have less money to pay our teachers, or secure needed resources. We don't want to get into the same situation as schools with stagnate or decreasing enrollment, such as Austin ISD. When you get into that type of situation the most difficult budget cuts become necessary.

Q. Will all of the 9-12 grade students be in the new annex building? If so, who will be in the existing high school building?

A. Both the existing 9 – 12 grade Learning Center, and the new HS Annex Building, will be needed to accommodate all our high school classes and students. There is a separate wing for special education services, with its own entrance, also located in this new building that will serve multiple age groups.

Q. Traffic and parking are problems now. The added HS enrollment will only exacerbate the problem. What is the plan to improve the traffic flow before it gets even worse?

A. We recently commissioned a traffic flow study by Kimley-Horn engineers to look at the impact of the Westinghouse Road improvements, the added high school enrollment, and the future Gateway School of Arts & Sciences to the current situation. The final report with recommendations is due early summer, in time for us to make changes before the new school year begins. Preliminary results show significant improvements to our current traffic flow can be expected following the Westinghouse Road improvements. To see the Williamson County plans for the Westinghouse Road improvement and expansion in front of, and to the east and west of our campus, go here <https://www.wilco.org/CR-111-105>

Q. What happened to the tennis courts and performing arts center that were in a previous master facility plan?

A. The “performing arts center” labeled on one of the older master facility plans was intended as a dual purpose space to serve as both a gym for P.E./athletics, but also to accommodate some arts performances, and large gatherings such as assemblies and graduation. What is currently labeled as the “main gym”, and “auxiliary gym” in the most recent master facility plan serves the same purpose as the space once labeled “performing arts center”. We all know that gymnasiums are poor substitutes to also host artistic performances. We'd like to have a single purpose Performing Arts Center like our better-funded local public schools have. With less funding to work with we've had to make do with what we could afford. The future Gateway School of Arts & Sciences will have a space dedicated for artistic performances that will not be shared with P.E/athletics. Regarding tennis, we decided to only offer the nine sports we currently do for budgetary reasons.

Q. Where does the money come from to build the Gateway Prep School HS Annex Building, and to purchase the property for the future Gateway School of Arts and Sciences?

A. When we build we typically go to the private bond market to borrow money for construction, or we use local lending institutions we already have relationships with. Because of our strong financial rating from Standard & Poor's credit rating service, we are one of a small number of charter school operators that qualify for the State of Texas “Permanent School Fund Bond Guarantee” backed securities, allowing us to borrow at very low interest rates. We then service construction debt from our school operations. Unlike traditional public schools that use local tax revenues to service building debt, public charter schools

don't have that luxury, so state per pupil funding is primarily how we service our debt. We dedicate our charitable giving funds to help cover our faculty and support staff salaries.

Q. It was stated in the original announcement that increasing the high school enrollment would also make Gateway Prep more competitive in UIL athletics. I'm concerned about an over emphasis on athletics at the expense of academics. Are we an academic school or are we a school that puts sports and athletic scholarships first?

A. Our school motto is "Citizen, Scholar, Athlete". It has been our stated purpose from the beginning to offer a top academic charter school that also is a member of the University Interscholastic League ("UIL") offering quality athletic programs, along with some fine arts and UIL academic competition offerings. Until recent years, Gateway Prep was the only charter school in the greater Austin area that provided their students this UIL experience.

UIL offerings come with a cost, but we have never deviated from our commitment to do so in a cost-effective manner, thus our requirement that student-athlete families pay an athletic fee to play, keeping our athletic costs at a much lower percentage of our school budget than our UIL public school competitors. While our academic scores have continued to improve over the years, now ranking us a top ten academic school in the greater Austin area, our athletic expenditures not covered by the athletic fees have consistently been much less than the traditional UIL schools we compete against.

There is no conflict between the best in academics and the best we can be in the sports we chose to offer. Most of our families are here because of this unique dual offering.