

Lakeland's New Tech open for business **by Guy Thompson**

The dust has settled on the renovations that have taken place over the past six months and LaGrange County's newest school opened its doors Thursday morning.

Lakeland High School's Leading EDGE started classes after two years of planning, training, renovating, and more training. The Leading EDGE is part of LHS, but at the same time is its own area within the building. With large windows looking into each double-sized classroom, desks set up in clusters, and a movable divider for a wall, this is the look of the 21st Century classroom.

"It's nervous optimism," Lakeland School Board President Bob Bond said in anticipation of seeing the two years of work coming to fruition. He has been excited to see all of the New Tech training in the past year and how well teachers have taken to the new model. "The teachers are as engaged as we want the students to be," Bond noted. "The purpose of the New Tech training is to get the teachers into the position that the students will be in."

And that has involved a lot of training, which was still going on at the beginning of the week, just a couple of days prior to the start of school. Drew Schrader, a school development coach for New Tech, spent the day Monday working with teachers on a mostly individual basis as they worked to put the finishing touches on their class plans. "We looked at project ideas, fleshed out some of those ideas, and worked on strategies," Schrader said. Schrader had previously worked with LHS teachers during the harsh "boot camp" they went through in Indianapolis over the summer, as well as other visits to the school this month.

"They've seen a lot of growth on how project-based learning works in their area," Schrader added. It's the project-based learning (PBL) that is both at the heart of New Tech and the biggest change. Teachers have been working together in their own groups, just as students will, developing projects that students will complete as well as working out how they will collaborate in the classes. "They've been making great progress," Schrader stated. "They are ready to take it on."

LHS Principal Eva Merkel is excited to see this day come, but realizes that work continues. "If we stay true to the model, it'll work," she said.

The changes have been difficult for some in the community to grasp, as education at LHS moves away from straight book learning and tests to PBL and groups. "We're so invested in its success because it's the right thing to do," Bond noted. Now that the Leading EDGE is not just on paper or in training sessions with teachers, but with students in the rooms working on the projects teachers have created, Bond sees some of the misconceptions hopefully being debunked. As it is with traditional education models, grades are at the top of the list. Bond said the Leading EDGE offers "better mapping than ever before," for grading. Rubrics will define every area of the class, from content to 21st Century skills, that students need to know and what their corresponding grade will be based on those standards. "True effort is rewarded," he pointed out. "That wasn't always the case, unless you showed it on tests."

Bond acknowledges the difficulty of the classes will rise, but notes, "If they never see hard work, it won't pay off and they won't work hard." He added that the skills that are being taught in the New Tech model "aren't being taught in traditional curriculum."

"It's not school the way we did school. Times have changed. We have to change with the times," Merkel added. "That's what we're here for. Knowledge has changed."

The community is welcome to come to the Open House planned for the Lakeland Leading EDGE and see the changes first-hand. The Open House is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Sept. 29.