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## Windows HS: Microsoft designs a school system

**PHILADELPHIA, Pennsylvania** (AP) -- Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates has famously called high schools "obsolete" and warned about their effect on U.S. competitiveness. Now, his company has a chance to prove that it can help fix the woes of public education.

After three years of planning, the Microsoft Corp.-designed "School of the Future" opened its doors Thursday, a gleaming white modern facility looking out of place amid rows of ramshackle homes in a working-class West Philadelphia neighborhood.

The school is being touted as unlike any in the world, with not only a high-tech building -- students have digital lockers and teachers use interactive "smart boards" -- but also a learning process modeled on Microsoft's management techniques.

"Philadelphia came to us ... and asked us to design a school," said Craig Mundie, chief research and strategy officer of Redmond, Washington-based Microsoft. "We're going to take our best shot."

The company didn't pay the \$63 million cost -- that was borne by the Philadelphia School District -- but shared its personnel and management skills. About 170 teens, nearly all black and mainly low-income, were chosen by lottery to make up the freshman class. The school eventually plans to enroll up to 750 students.

Sabria Johnson, a 14-year-old from West Philadelphia, said she is excited to be attending the school.

"We're getting a chance to do something new," said the freshman, who hopes one day to go to Harvard or to the London College of Fashion. "We don't get a lot of opportunities like the suburban kids."

Mundie said companies have long been concerned that schools aren't churning out graduates with the skills and know-how that businesses require in employees to compete globally -- and mental acuity is especially critical to Microsoft.

"Our raw material is smart people," he said.

School district CEO Paul Vallas said he was impressed by more than just the company's technology.

"I was also taken by their culture," Vallas said. "They created a culture within which ideas can be generated and acted upon."

At the 162,000-square-foot high school, which sits on nearly eight acres, the day starts at 9:15 a.m. and ends at 4:19 p.m., simulating the typical work day. Officials said studies show students do better when they start later in the day.

Students -- who are called "learners" -- use smart cards to register attendance, open their digital lockers and track calories they consume. They carry laptops, not books, and the entire campus has wireless Internet access.

Teachers, or "educators," rather than using blackboards, have interactive "smart boards" that allow teachers to zoom in and out, write or draw, and even link to the Internet.

There's no library, but an "interactive learning center" where information is all digital and a "multimedia specialist" will help out students.

Instead of a cafeteria, there's a food court with restaurant-style seating. The performance center -- where two sections rotate close to create a smaller space -- replaces the typical auditorium.

"This is completely different from any Philadelphia school I've ever seen," said Tramelle Hicks, 39, of West Philadelphia, whose 15-year-old daughter, Kierra, is going to the school. She said she believes her daughter would benefit from learning strategic and organizational skills from Microsoft.

The high school will use an "education competency wheel," patterned after a set of desirable traits Microsoft encourages among its employees. Officials, teachers and students are to be trained in dozens of skills, including organizing and planning, negotiating, dealing with ambiguity and managing relationships.

Students have scheduled appointments with teachers, typed into their online calendars, instead of being limited to structured times for classes. Their laptops carry software that assesses how quickly they're learning the lesson. If they get it, they'll dive deeper into the subject. If not, they get remedial help.

Lessons will have more incorporation of current events to teach subjects. For instance, a question of whether Philadelphia is safe from the avian flu will teach students about geography, science and history.

"Learning is not just going to school," said Shirley Grover, the school's energetic principal who came from the American School in Milan, Italy. "Learning is equal to life."

In addition, students at the school must apply to college to get a diploma.

This new approach to education has sparked the interest of Doug Lynch, vice dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

"Two things are quite intriguing -- the willingness of the district and Microsoft to try something different," Lynch said. He cautioned, however, that while trying new methods may be valuable "we have to be careful because you're messing with kids' lives."

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