

New East Aurora science labs 'not your mama's science program'



Simmons Middle School is one of East Aurora School District 131's three middle schools that will be getting a new science lab. (Sarah Freishtat / The Beacon-News)

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Months after East Aurora School District 131 board members approved millions of dollars in new science equipment and materials, administrators are working to create new science labs at each of the district's middle schools.

The labs are designed to include the microscopes, water hookup, electricity, internet and other equipment necessary for experiments conducted under new state science standards, Director of Curriculum Carla Johnson said. Typical middle school science classrooms have not always had the supplies or set-up for experiments and group work, Chris Heath, science and social studies facilitator for grades K-8, said.

"Everything would be at our fingertips so there would be no possibilities of any (state standards) experiment being out of our reach," Johnson said.

The new science rooms are in the works after a late 2015 audit found the district needed to revamp its labs, Johnson said.

Each of East Aurora's three middle schools is slated to receive one lab that teachers will be able to take their classes to, similar to a library or computer lab. The lab at Cowherd Middle School is already up and running, but more work is needed to prepare the spaces at Simmons and Waldo middle schools. Johnson said she wants the remaining two labs to be open for next school year.

The creation of the labs comes after the board in April approved about \$5.5 million worth of science technology and materials for use throughout the district, as well as training for teachers and a license for the STEMscopes curriculum program. District officials at the time said the STEMscopes purchase was designed to help East Aurora meet the state's Next Generation Science Standards, which were designed to take full effect this school year.

The purchase covered equipment for the middle school labs, and included technology for all middle school science classrooms that will allow students to use probes and record experiments via video, Johnson said. There will likely be an additional construction cost for the labs at Simmons and Waldo, which Johnson estimated to be around \$250,000, though she said final costs were still being determined.

Heath said the labs are designed to have enough space and equipment for students to work in groups and conduct experiments. They will have lab tables with surfaces designed to withstand chemical spills, longer tables that can hold larger equipment and water available during dissections.

"It's really just to give the students and teachers a space that's a real, dedicated lab space," Heath said.

In the past, some classrooms have been "more equipped" than others for science experiments, Johnson said. Teachers have made good use of their classes, but a dedicated lab environment and equipment will help, she said.

The labs are necessary to be able to do experiments that meet the new state science standards, Johnson said. They are designed to make science fresh and new for students, and administrators took safety into account when designing them.

"Just the environment itself is reminding both staff and students that it's not your mama's science program," Johnson said.

Johnson said she hopes the labs will allow students to explore aspects of science and feel like they're the first ones to discover new things. She hopes they will feel like scientists. Maybe, she said, it will encourage students to take high school courses based on science, technology, engineering and math, or consider careers in the field.

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