

Long-delayed school breaks ground

Parents who bought nearby homes expecting a campus by 2003 remain frustrated with year's delay.

By MONICA VALENCIA

The Orange County Register

Construction has begun on the \$54.5 million Arnold O. Beckman High School in Irvine, where a groundbreaking ceremony for the new Tustin Unified School District campus takes place today.

O.C.'s newest high school

[Click to see graphic](#) 

Many parents who moved to homes near the Beckman site so their children could attend a new school have been frustrated by the delay. Many of the students now attend Tustin High School.

Beckman High, the district's third high school, will open in September 2004 to more than 1,900 students. The state-of-the-art school will include separate wings for arts, humanities and science/math, high-tech science labs, a performing-arts center, swimming pool and gymnasium.

"When we built the two existing high schools, the highest form of technology was either the film-strip projector or the overhead projector," Tustin Unified Superintendent Peter Gorman said. "Now, it's not uncommon to have five to 30 computers in a classroom."

Beckman High originally was set to open in fall 2003 to serve students mainly in the Northpark, Northpark Square and West Irvine neighborhoods. The neighborhoods are within Irvine's city limits but are served by the Tustin Unified School District. Plans for Beckman were put on hold after state funds ran out last year. Tustin Unified was promised \$66 million, but the district's position in line to receive the funds dropped after the state prioritized urban districts ahead of suburban districts.

By refinancing about \$41.5 million in homeowners bonds, school district officials were able to move forward with construction of Beckman and relieve overcrowding at Tustin and Foothill high schools.

"I'm very excited," said west Irvine parent Lyann Collins, who plans to send her son Eben, 11, to the new high school. "(But) we needed this school yesterday. That school is long overdue. This is really happy news for kids who are going to overcrowded schools."

Tustin High has a capacity of 1,692 students but uses 18 portable classrooms to help serve 2,073. Foothill High has a 1,773-student capacity and serves 2,227.

The delay in building Beckman High, and also Hicks Canyon Elementary School, incensed parents who were sold on the new Irvine homes in the \$400,000 to \$500,000 range after real estate agents told them the new schools would be built by next year. The construction of Hicks Canyon, also set to open in fall 2003, has been put on hold until the school district hears next month from the state on the funds owed to the school district.

Some parents tried to transfer their children to Northwood High School in the Irvine Unified School District, especially after Tustin High recently was identified as a Federal Program Improvement School, or a low-performing school. This designation under the No Child Left Behind Act allows parents to transfer their children out of such schools.

Irvine district officials have said both Northwood and Irvine high schools accept interdistrict transfers if approved by the home district.

But parents, including Curtis Winter, said they have been denied transfer requests. He said he tried to transfer his children, Matthew, 17, and Alisha, 15, out of Tustin High, which is 6 miles from their home, to either nearby Northwood High, which is a mile away, or Foothill High.

But the school district denied the transfer out of Tustin Unified, and Foothill has no room for his kids.

"My biggest beef is the overcrowding," Winter said. "It's hard to instruct kids in (overcrowded) classrooms. I can't help but think that the Irvine school district would have pushed them harder to get higher GPAs."

"It's great that they're having the groundbreaking for Beckman," Winter said. "But the chances of my children benefiting from it are nil."

Gorman said the school district has denied transfers because "we can provide a quality education and don't want our students to leave."

Also, it is important not to lose students who generate the average daily attendance funds of about \$4,440 per student per year, Gorman added.

"Like any other district, we want to keep our ADA," he said.