

Berkshire Country Day School nears \$3 million mark for campus project, salaries

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Furey Hall at Berkshire Country Day School in Stockbridge will be renovated into a library and performance art space thanks to funds raised during a recent capital campaign. (Ben Garver — The Berkshire Eagle)

STOCKBRIDGE — Berkshire Country Day School is celebrating the approach of the finishing line for its two-year, \$3 million campaign to fund a new library, performing arts space and to enhance the endowment, specifically for higher faculty salaries.

Before a packed campus party last weekend, Head of School Paul Lindenmaier announced to 250 guests that \$2,838,548 is in hand toward the "Fulfilling the Promise" campaign. Groundbreaking is expected next June for the Kim & James Taylor Music & Performance Room and the Kevin Hirt Library & Learning Commons, Lindenmaier said.

"The school had the myth at one time that it was just a place for the elite and affluent," Lindenmaier told the Eagle on Monday. "The members of the board and donors to this campaign represent a cross-section of everything we are."

The facilities, costing about \$1.5 million, are designed by Flansburg Architects, the noted Boston firm, and will be built by Allegrone Construction, which submitted the most competitive bid for a restoration of the historic Furey Hall. Allegrone handled the school's Fitzpatrick Gym and Peterson Hall in the late 1990s.

The opening is targeted for 2017, Lindenmaier said, calling the project the most dramatic upgrade at the school, founded in 1946 on what had been Brook Farm, in 20 years.

"This Learning Commons is going to transform how we think about teaching, learning and space at school," he said. "There's going to be distance learning, we'll be engaged with the outside world in new and exciting ways."

"We want to be the quintessential Berkshire school," he added. "We will always strive to continue to have the balance necessary to achieve our academic goals."

The pre-K through 9th grade independent, non-profit school adjoins the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, just south of Tanglewood.

The Taylors, honorary co-chairpersons of the campaign, have educated their twin sons, ninth-graders Rufus and Henry, at BCD for the past 11 years.

"Kim and I are both the products of independent school educations, and finding BCD was the single most important thing that allowed us to move to the Berkshires and to raise our family here," the singer-songwriter said.

"The faculty, parents and students here form a community with a soul, an ethical, caring, cooperative family that have given our boys the best possible foundation from which to carry on," he told the gathering on Friday night. "We've seen some amazing schools with vast endowments, monumental facilities, top-notch faculties, but nowhere will we hope to find the equal of BCD in heart, soul and spirit."

The performance facility funded by the Taylors will include an instructional music classroom and event space for up to 100 guests.



The Kevin Hirt Library & Learning Commons is depicted in this rendering provided by Flansburg Architects of Boston. (Courtesy illustration)

The new Kevin Hirt Library & Learning Commons is named for the BCD student who died in 2001 of neuroblastoma, an aggressive pediatric cancer. Kevin, who was 10, had asked his parents to donate his college fund to the school for a library expansion.

His parents, Paul Hirt and Lynn Campana, raised additional funds and attended the celebratory gathering. "Your presence here is almost beyond words — profoundly meaningful, your engagement to help us realize this vision has been an act of love that honors the memory of your son whose impact on this school is immeasurable," Lindenmaier told the crowd.

"The best things about Berkshire Country Day School for Kevin were that he could be a normal kid here, go to class, play with friends, and forget about having cancer for the day," said his mother. Referring to the facilities project, she added, "I think Kevin would be really happy to know this is happening."

Lindenmaier, who succeeded Robert Peterson as Head of School in July 2008, noted that the faculty endowment was a campaign priority. About \$600,000 of the \$3 million raised will be targeted to augment the faculty fund, part of the school's current \$1.5 million endowment, which has tripled since 2008. Even though teacher salaries at most independent schools are lower than at public schools, he acknowledged, "teachers really want to be here because of the quality of the school and they get to be really involved decision-makers, they're not following the fads of public education. They love the kids, the quality of the student body is amazing."

Many faculty members have taught at the school for decades, including a married couple, Eugénie and Jim Fawcett, marking 40 years teaching together.

Lindenmaier emphasized that the Furey Hall renovation will not involve taking on debt, reflecting the school's recovery from the brink of financial disaster in 2008, when it was saddled with \$500,000 in red ink on a budget between \$3 million and \$4 million. The current budget is \$3.3 million.

"We got our house in order before we moved forward," he said, "but the real story is going on right now in those classrooms. Financial stewardship is all about what's best for the kids."

In June 2007, BCD abandoned a costly, six-year expansion into 10th through 12th grades on a separate campus at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute campus on West Street in Lenox. "The demographics didn't support it," Lindenmaier said.

No similar venture is in the cards, he said. "My charge was to restore our identity as a pre-K through Grade 9 school," he said.

Current enrollment is about 150, said Lindenmaier, "and we want to build from there ... but we're very comfortable with 150; if the demographics in the Berkshires change, we're ready to change with it." The school's capacity is 250 students; enrollment stood at 200 in 2008.

Despite BCD's downsizing, "we haven't dropped a stitch with the quality of our program offerings," Lindenmaier said. "We've expanded the quality and range of programs. The intimacy of the school is a real asset. Everyone here knows each other's names. We have the breadth and depth of a much larger school."

Twenty-nine percent of students received some financial aid based on need this year, but admission is "need-blind," he noted. Tuition peaks at \$25,700-\$27,500 for Grades 7-9.

"We've been watching the demographics and drilling into the census data at the school for the past seven years," he elaborated. "We've committed to being a smaller school with the downturn in the population in the Berkshires."

As a result, he added, the school has fulfilled its stewardship goals and achieved a surplus of about \$200,000 for 2014-15 while creating reserves.

Thanks to strategic planning, "we were able to both downsize and expand at the same time," Lindenmaier said. Achievements include a well-received, major commitment to visual and performing arts and an expanded technology curriculum integrated with academic instruction, in addition to reading, writing, math and science skills.

"The key is the fiscal stewardship of the board through difficult times in the Berkshires while improving the quality and enhancing the reputation of the school," Lindenmaier said. "It's really been kind of a win-win."

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By the numbers ...

BCD enrollment: 150 (2015-16); 200 (2007-08)

Capacity: 250

Budget: \$3.3 million (2014-15).

Surplus: \$200,000 (2014-2015)

Faculty: 27 (21 full-time)

Student-faculty (full & part-time) ratio: 5-1

Tuition range

Pre-school: \$8,500 - \$15,200

K-Grade 3: \$19,200-\$22,200

Grades 4-6: \$23,300-\$24,700

Grades 7-9: \$25,700-\$27,500

Financial assistance: 29 percent of students

Source: Berkshire Country Day School administration.

In his own words ...

During an Eagle interview, Head of School Paul Lindenmaier describes the goals of Berkshire Country Day school, an independent pre-K through Grade 9 campus accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges:

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"We're proud of our independence, in many ways our standards remain high and consistent over time. We do use a rigorous form of standardized testing to measure our kids' performances, but we're not driven by the politics of testing. We're really developing the whole person who's also super well-prepared academically."

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"We put a premium on developing each child's individual voice, how they know themselves, so we put a lot of emphasis on character education and quality of relationships in the community. Parents find a community where they can really be engaged in their child's education and the life of the school."

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"The kids here are just amazing at engaging as collaborators, they're compelling speakers, strong writers, able to really work on project formats, and those are the skills that are necessary and desired going forward."

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"I cannot state more proudly how I feel about our teachers, There's something extraordinary going on here, they are what attracted me to BCD. They make it happen, any parent will tell you about the power of the teacher-student relationship, the transference of knowledge, how the child is developed intellectually, socially and emotionally."

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"We're doing a far better job living our mission, we're really inspiring individuals, we care about the individual promise of each student but we care about that person becoming a participating, healthy, vibrant, meaningful member of a changing world."