

Seven years after destructive flooding, Clendenin community eyes finish line on new school

Students, some who lost family members or homes in the 2016 flood, are expected to move into their new school next year. “I know it has to be bittersweet for them,” said Kanawha County Superintendent Tom Williams.

BY: **AMELIA FERRELL KNISELY** - SEPTEMBER 19, 2023 4:45 PM



In Kanawha County, a community that suffered the loss of lives, homes and more in a devastating flood, is getting closer to moving into its new elementary school.

Construction is continuing on the new Clendenin Elementary, and the facility is expected to open for the 2024-25 school year.

The school's principal, Angel Gurski, joined Kanawha County Superintendent Tom Williams and others for a tour of the construction site Tuesday morning. The school is starting to take shape, with windows and classrooms framed. Stone-covered pillars held up a walkway out front.

"The kids being able to be in a modern, up-to-date facility in their own hometown — I think it's really neat," Williams said. "It's nice to finally come to the end of a project. It [has] been seven years."

Nearly all of the former elementary school, Clendenin Elementary, was [destroyed](#) in the 2016 flood. Torrential rain flooded the county and beyond, killing 23 people, including children.

The flooding [washed out](#) more than 100 homes and [damaged 25 schools](#) in the state.

Nicholas County schools, damaged by high water, [still haven't](#) been rebuilt.

Herbert Hoover High School, not far from Clendenin, [was ruined](#). After years of students attending classes in [portable classroom](#) buildings, the school [reopened](#) in a state-of-the-art facility in August.



Clendenin Elementary Principal Angel Gurski (left) and Kanawha County Superintendent Tom Williams (third from left) toured the construction site for the new school, which is expected to open for the 2024-25 school year. (Amelia Ferrell Knisely | West Virginia Watch)

Administrators, teachers and students at Clendenin Elementary are anxiously awaiting their turn to step into the next chapter for their school.

“The opening of Hoover has gotten us excited, to be honest. It makes us feel like we are finally at the end of the road and get what we deserve,” Gurski said.

The elementary construction went on hold for nine months in 2021 after pyritic sulfur [was found](#) in the soil, which could impact the school’s foundation.

The problem also raised the school's price tag to around \$40 million. FEMA, which signed off on the [soil remediation](#), is paying 90% of the construction cost. Williams said they worked with county and state government on the project, as well.

After the flooding, Clendenin Elementary students were sent to Bridge Elementary to continue school, where they're in classrooms in the Bridge building and portable classrooms in the parking lot.

Kanawha County [merged](#) the schools, and roughly 329 students [will move](#) to the new school when it opens.

Michelle Callen, who works as support staff in the school, became emotional as she toured the school.

"It's a little overwhelming to think that we will eventually get all of this when, right now, we are squashed all together," Callen said. "It's really exciting that we'll have all this because we've just been making do, and we do well with making do."

The new building will include a STEM room, multiple health clinic rooms and a dentistry room. Extra-large windows, framed and moving toward completion, lined a main hallway, which will provide natural light over reading areas.

Callen said she was looking forward to having a "contained" area for kids where they won't have to go outside in the rain or cold between classes, like they do now in their portable buildings.

Each grade level will have its own space that holds its own teacher area, restrooms and outdoor learning space.

"It's changing the way we deliver education," said Andrew Crawford, executive director of facilities planning for Kanawha County Schools.

There are students in the school now who lost family members, homes and belongings in the devastating flooding.

Williams said he knows this is the "new beginning" for them.

“I know it has to be bittersweet for them,” he said.

