

New head of independent Village school plans major renovation



Courtesy Of The Village School
Head of The Village School, Gabriella Rowe, for Sunday Q&A.

By Jennifer Radcliffe
August 30, 2014

After 15 years as the head of an elite private school in New York, Gabriella Rowe moved to Houston this summer to take the helm of the Village School. She has hit the ground running, unveiling a new master plan for the 28-acre preK-12 campus in west Houston, which enrolls about 1,500 students. She shared some of her ideas with Chronicle education reporter Jennifer Radcliffe. Edited excerpts follow.

Q: What brought you here?

A: The opportunity. I'm a born and bred New Yorker. Much of my educational experience has been in the New York City educational market. I think that the growth opportunity in markets such as Houston for the best-in-class 21st century education is unparalleled. I was approached with this opportunity and really jumped on it. Fortunately, I have an incredibly loving and forgiving family who said, "Sure, we'll pick up and move to Houston. No problem."

Q: What are your priorities for the Village School?

A: Village has an incredible history of strength in math and science. It's always been at the core of what they have done incredibly well, coupled with this very rich, comprehensive arts program that covers the physical arts, the fine arts, the dramatic arts. Really what they have needed more than anything is for someone to come in and bring it all together - build a plan on how to play it forward to the 21st century and make sure everybody knows about it.

Q: I understand you just announced a new master plan for the campus?

A: It is a full recalibration and evolution of the campus and the program. The physical plant changes will be the manifestation of some really big curricular enhancements. We have 15 undeveloped acres. We are expanding one of our residential buildings to support our residential program, we're expanding our middle school and adding an early childhood learning center. That will be in by September of 2015. We are going to be adding a science and arts facility with a full maker lab, biology gardens and art studios on the top floor, adding a full athletic center and student center that includes a lecture hall; adding a competitive swimming pool because we're using other people's now and that's not a fully equipped campus. And tennis courts to support primarily our residential program. It's something we should have on campus, and again, building out our athletic fields. This is actually already under construction and these fields will be open for September 2015.

Q: What kind of capital drive will this require?

A: We are a part of a family and network of schools owned by Meritas, which is an educational company that has brought together a family of K-12 schools around the world. There are two ways to raise money as a school. As a not-for-profit school, you're getting donations from parents or as a proprietary school, you raise money from investors. My preference is always to raise money from investors and banks. It can be very difficult, but I'd rather do that than from donors because the agendas are very clear. If we're successful as a school and we do what we promise we're going to do, people will enroll. And if people enroll, then we'll be successful and our investors will be happy. When you raise funds in the non-for-profit world, the agendas can sometimes get muddled.

Q: What is the maximum student enrollment for the Village School?

A: The max when high school is filled, when these new facilities are fully utilized: over 2,000. Where in that range over 2,000 I think will depend on the size and layout of some of these new buildings. We don't want to be too big. The excellence and standard of the product we're delivering has to be first and foremost. That's one of the most important lessons I'm bringing from New York here to Houston. Many of the schools in New York grew extremely rapidly, and quite frankly, too rapidly.