

School

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the approximately 200 eighth graders who will be displaced from their classrooms.

Acting swiftly following the Wednesday morning fire, school board members held a special meeting Thursday to approve a clean-up contract and hear the administration's plan to reopen the school by April 20.

Board members unanimously approved a \$188,429 contract with Paul Davis Systems of Coastal Carolinas Inc. of Wilmington to remove and dispose of all ceiling tile in the building, clean and apply smoke odor counteractant above the ceiling height and clean and deodorize all floors, walls, doors, windows, cabinets, technology equipment and heating/air conditioning ducts.

Under terms of the contract, all work must be completed by April 17 or the company must pay a \$500-per-day penalty.

"Clean-up crews have been working diligently to get the school ready in time," assistant superintendent of school operations Clarence Willie said Tuesday. "I went out there yesterday and the principal's office was covered with soot. But when I went back today it was clean, and the papers on the top of the desk were so clean they looked like they'd been photocopied."

The 800 and 200 classroom pods in the most severely damaged area of the school are being sealed off and school officials say they will demolish most of the wing and rebuild it. Six mobile units arrived at the school this week to house eighth graders displaced by the fire.

Brunswick County fire marshal Cecil Logan estimated that the fire burned for six hours before firefighters were summoned.

An upgraded fire alarm system that automatically alerts 911 would have prevented that. Superintendent of schools Marion Wise said he hopes to install the upgrade in all county schools within the next two years.

"We're in the process of upgrading them now," he said, adding that the upgrade systems are not a state requirement but that about 40 percent of all schools in the state are equipped with the 911 alerting system.

School board members said they are impressed by the speedy action taken by school administrators.

"They didn't drag their feet because they know we've got to get those kids back in school," said board member Bud Thorsen. "I'm real pleased that when we have a crisis we can pull together as a team and do what needs to be done."

Mintz called the pace of the clean-up effort "amazing."

"Everything in the building from the roof to the carpet is being cleaned," she said. "There are probably 60 to 70 people here with all types of equipment. It's amazing what they're doing."

She added that many renovations had been completed at the school before the fire, including new floors, carpeting, freshly painted walls and a new roof. Now, many of those renovations will have to be undertaken again.

"We've invested a lot of time and effort into improving the school climate here," she said. "But things are really looking good in a short period of time, and we have a strong faculty, so I'm sure we'll get over this."

As soon as students return, Mintz said she will hold a meeting for the entire student body to discuss what happened, what will happen in the future and what's expected of the students.

"As long as we keep the kids apprised and don't try to hide anything, they'll try to cooperate," she said. "The kids have a vested interest in this school building, too. I think everyone will rally around the effort to get our school back in shape."



Supervisors with Paul Davis Systems of Coastal Carolinas examine damage in the main hallway leading to the eighth grade pod. Cleaning crews say they'll have the school ready for occupancy by April 17. Photo by Terry Pope

Damage

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sometime early Wednesday morning. He estimates another \$1.5 million in damage and clean-up costs to the rest of the school. The fire damaged about one-third of an adjacent wing.

"The only thing we could determine is that it originated in room 802, around the teacher's desk area," said Logan. "It appears to be some type of electrical malfunction."

Investigators have examined an electrical socket in that general area to determine if an overloaded plug may have heated and ignited some flammable items in the classroom. The fire spread into the roof, and when flames started shooting out the eaves and smoke billowed from the soffits it quickly became more visible.

The fire destroyed the classrooms in the pod, reaching temperatures high enough to melt metal-framed chairs and to balloon a cinderblock wall in the hallway by approximately 12 inches. Windows apparently exploded from the heat in the 800

building. In the hallways, student artwork displayed on bulletin boards and taped to walls became crisp curls of paper scorched by the heat.

"I think it had been burning since around midnight," said Logan, "just from some information we have been able to gather."

That would put the blaze at six hours strong before it was spotted shooting from the roof and when 911 was first notified around 6 a.m. Leland Middle, like all other county schools, is equipped with hand-triggered fire alarm systems only. They do not contain automated alarms capable of detecting the presence of fire and notifying the 911 center. Logan said his department and the schools will consider adding such automated systems in the school buildings.

It was the worst school fire in Brunswick County in decades. Not since fire destroyed the old Southport High School in 1969 had firemen responded to a blaze of this magnitude at a school. Firefighters from Leland, Navassa, Northwest and across the county rushed to the scene when the call went out. Other fire departments and rescue squads

offered assistance as crews were on hand for most of the morning making sure sparks were completely extinguished in the ceiling.

"We've had minor fires before, but nothing this bad," said Logan.

Fire damaged a home economics classroom at North Brunswick High two years ago. That fire was the result of an electrical malfunction around a range hood but was discovered by school staff several hours after students had gone home.

At Leland Middle, when flames spread to the ceiling, smoke and soot then entered the vents and crawl space and emptied onto other parts of the building. No part of the 85,000 square feet of school space was left untouched by this blaze.

Cleaning crews from Paul Davis Systems of Coastal Carolinas in Wilmington began work Friday morning, first in the cafeteria area, away from the location of the blaze, and then began to work back toward the 800 pod. School maintenance crews carried computers from the lab in the sixth grade pod onto the courtyard for a good dusting and cleaning.

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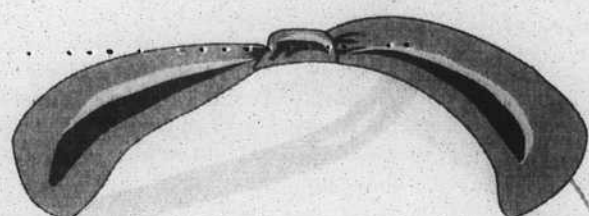


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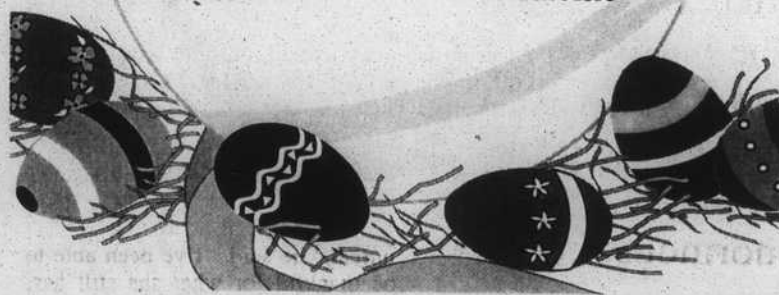


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