

New building, new opportunities Ceremony honors Barrows Academy and its students

By LOUISA OWEN SONSTROEM Chronicle Staff Writer

WINDHAM — A long line of uniformed children stood quietly in the gymnasium of the Charles H. Barrows STEM Academy, listening as Windham Public Schools Superintendent Ana Ortiz encouraged them toward greatness.

“Look into the future and look into what you can become,” she urged.

The sixth-grade class at the newly opened magnet school will be the first group to graduate from the school when they turn their eighth-grade tassels in 2016.

At the Tuckie Road school’s official dedication ceremony Friday, officials and dignitaries honored not only the shiny glass and piled stonework of the new building, but also the students who will move through the school and out into the broader world.

“You’re trailblazers, my sixth-graders,” said keynote speaker Matt Fleury, president and chief executive officer of the Connecticut Science Center and member of the state Board of Regents for Higher Education.

Although the speeches were full of solemn words wishing bright futures for the students,

the youths themselves had their own ways of appreciating the building.

“I think it’s pretty awesome,” said sixthgrade student Bianca Lopez of Windham.

“Goodie,” offered fellow sixth-grade student and Windham resident Andrea Villa, who said she is especially enjoying learning clarinet at her new school.

When asked about favorite aspects of the Barrows experience, classmate Dayshalee Torres, also of Windham, said, “we got to use the science laboratory yesterday.”

“A lot of new opportunities,” Dayshalee said.

Those opportunities were celebrated earnestly during the ceremony.

“I want to welcome you all to the most beautifully designed and built school edifice in all of Connecticut,” said Barrows Principal Jeffrey Wihbey.

He said students this year, when only kindergarten and grades 1, 2, 5 and 6 are enrolled, are hailing from 22 different towns and communities around the region.

“It’s the composition that reflects our real world,” Wihbey explained.

He recognized past and present magnet school building committee members as well as those from architecture firm ID3A, program manager Arcadis and project development and construction group Skanska, for their work to create the building, which will eventually house students in preschool through grade 8.

“This is truly a community project and I’m so proud to be here today in this wonderful building,” said state Rep. Susan Johnson, D-Willimantic.

“ Whatever Windham builds, builds Windham, and that’s exactly what’s happening here today,” said Windham Mayor Ernest Eldridge.

Fleury, who heads the Connecticut Science Center, which is a partner of the school, shared some of the

research he had conducted about 19th-century inventor Charles H. Barrows, for whom the school was named.

Local resident Barrows, born in 1841, was responsible for many inventions, including an early electric-powered tricycle, elevated trolley car rail system and steam-powered revolving swing.

Humorously, Barrows was at one time a manufacturer and seller of “moustache protectors,” a fact that garnered some giggles from the sixth-graders.

Fleury also listed many other inventions, some obviously important and others more quietly significant, which were the products of Connecticut people’s minds — the Wiffle ball, nuclear-powered submarine, various pharmaceutical drugs and the subtly curved tape measure that can be held stiff, for example.

“ There’s somebody you know who has a connection to some of these inventions,” Fleury said.

He explained the inquiry-based model of thought encouraged by science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education can be used in many roles — as a pharmacist or power- line technician, yes, but also as a parent or citizen.

“You’re full of more potential than you can imagine right now,” Fleury said.

“Not every child is privileged with this opportunity to have a school as special as this,” he continued. “You’ve got the opportunity. And you’re going to make the most of it, I can tell.”



Roxanne Pandolfi

Dayshalee Torres, Bianca Lopez and Andrea Villa, all students at the Charles H. Barrows STEM Academy in Windham, talk about their school after the official dedication ceremony on Friday.



Roxanne Pandolfi photos

ABOVE: Students stand during the official dedication ceremony at the Charles H. Barrows STEM Academy in Windham on Friday. BELOW: Keynote speaker Matt Fleury, president and chief executive officer of the Connecticut Science Center, holds up one of the many patent drawings done by the school's namesake.

