

NEW ORLEANS

# CONSTRUCTION

UPDATE

A Publication From The McDonnell Group, L.L.C. • Volume 1, Issue 1

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## Prototype Completed on Schedule

Belle Chasse Academy,  
NAS Joint Reserve Base

## Innovations Galore

McDonnell Group Completes  
2-Story Bed Bath & Beyond



**Building New Orleans McDonnell Built On Experience**



# Construction Project Supports Community-Based Learning

*The new gymnasium is modern while providing multifunctional use for various sports.*

**H**ow's this for real-world learning? The collaboration on the layout and design of the Belle Chasse Academy, a charter school located on the Naval Air Station, Joint Reserve Base New Orleans in Belle Chasse, Louisiana, began with input from educators.

“As an officer in the Marine Corps Reserve, but an educator in ‘real life,’ I was head of the military team that initially began the project,” says Jane Fitzgerald, principal of Belle Chasse Academy. Fitzgerald collaborated with

the original architects, and she explains her “biggest contribution” was the size of the third-to eighth-grade classrooms, which at 1,000-square-foot each “are quite roomy.”

The two-story school building includes 37 classrooms, all of which are equipped with computers and Internet access. There are also special classrooms for art, foreign language, and science instruction. But the thoughtfully designed components of the 90,000-square-foot building do not stop there.

A resource center, library, full-size gymnasium, cafeteria, and youth center make the Belle Chasse Academy an inviting environment for learning. There are plenty of windows. An open, friendly common space on entry reminds the kindergarten through eighth-grade students that interaction and time for reflection are crucial parts of learning.

The 2002-03 academic year is the inaugural one for Belle Chasse Academy. Current enrollment is 688 students, and an enrollment of 900 students is projected for the second year, says Fitzgerald.



To get the first year enrollees into the new school by September 2002, The McDonnell Group put in a special effort. “It was just seven months from the time we were driving piles until the students were in school,” says Joe Montalbano, a superintendent for The McDonnell Group.

“Everyone was focused on getting the job done,” says Montalbano, “doing whatever it took.” “It’s not the tightest schedule we’ve had,” he says, “but it was definitely tight.”

“Everybody put in an extra effort,” says Jason Zuckerman, project manager for The McDonnell Group. “All the subcontractors put in extra effort.” And no one, he says, made a greater commitment of time and energy than the superintendent for the job. “Joe Montalbano ran the field for me,” he says. “He was instrumental.”

Indeed, many people on the project recall Montalbano virtually “living on-site,” or being there 24/7. For his part, Montalbano has a self-effacing take on the entire effort. “I enjoyed being part of the team,” he says. He concedes he was there a lot, but not quite around the clock. He just did what had to be done.

Zuckerman adds it was not only a fast-track effort but also a tight budget that demanded some real planning on the part of The McDonnell Group. Zuckerman puts the emphasis on thorough preparation. “Extra hours don’t matter if the job is not planned well,” he says.

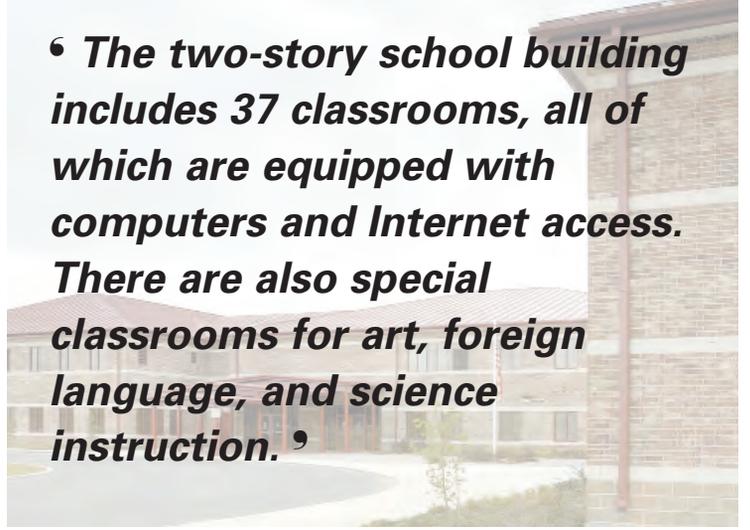
And the Belle Chasse Academy project was planned well. “It was a good project in terms of teamwork,” says Zuckerman, pointing to a good team that included the developer, Columbus General Properties, L.L.C., and the architectural firms of Mathes Brierre Architects and Billes Manning Architects.

The role The McDonnell Group took in the project was a broad one. The developer was looking for a general contractor that could cast a critical eye on the concept and look for reasonable cost savings that still gave the desired result. The McDonnell Group was working on two jobs at the University of New Orleans campus. The developer took note and approached The McDonnell Group about taking on the Belle Chasse Academy job.

Allan McDonnell, president of The McDonnell Group, says the Belle Chasse Academy demonstrates the ability of The McDonnell Group not just to manage the construction process but also to suggest ways to improve the approach.

Indeed, The McDonnell Group was able to trim \$400,000 from the cost projected by the designer.

Two important changes The McDonnell Group recommended were incorporated into the building. One is the rigid frame structure. The other is the direct-exchange air conditioning system. The original design called for a conventional steel structure and a two-pipe HVAC, or heating ventilation and air conditioning, system.



**‘ The two-story school building includes 37 classrooms, all of which are equipped with computers and Internet access. There are also special classrooms for art, foreign language, and science instruction. ’**

Members of The McDonnell Group who contributed to the project had the opportunity to work with the 11-member Board of Directors (BOD) of the Belle Chasse Academy. The BOD includes community leaders, parents, and Louisiana-certified teachers. All members of the BOD also have a direct or indirect affiliation with the military.

The interaction with end-users of the building was particularly exciting because Belle Chasse Academy is the first charter school built on the site of a military installation. Everyone took a great interest in demonstrating what could be done, being keenly aware that the school may be held up as a model for others to follow.

The McDonnell Group also worked closely with the project developer, Columbus General Properties, L.L.C., New Orleans, and the project architects, Mathes Brierre Architects and Billes Manning Architects, New Orleans. Flexibility was a key to the fast track completion of the \$8,100,000 school. For example, during the construction, the design was altered to stay within budget yet realize the concept the BOD and developer had.

Everyone involved recalls the compressed timeline as a memorable part of the effort. "We were the architects for Belle Chasse Academy," says Edward Mathes, chairman of Mathes Brierre Architects, "and due to the short time schedule, we had to prepare the design documents within three months."

"During these three months," Mathes continues, "we worked with The McDonnell Group, L.L.C., so they could begin foundation work within two months of preparing the construction documents. It was necessary to begin the project quickly," he explains, "in order to meet the scheduled move-in date for students in fall 2002."

The collaboration paid off in the way the BOD hoped it would. An enhanced learning environment, one that involves the entire community in education, is the result.

In fact, there are so many positive features in the school that Fitzgerald cites only some highlights. "The gymnasium is beautiful and multifunctional," she says. "The aesthetics of the curved, windowed wall in the library make that room relaxing and conducive to learning."



*The new library at Belle Chasse Academy fosters a learning environment that focuses on academic excellence.*

And, then, there are the spacious classrooms. The expanses are important, explains Fitzgerald, because of the freedom of movement they afford. Desks can be moved to organize fresh groupings. Teachers can easily wander to observe and help.

The mission of the Belle Chasse Academy is to foster a learning environment that focuses on academic excellence and meets the needs of military dependent children. In order to accomplish its mission the school strives to reduce service-connected disruption and stress, cultivates substantial and direct community and parental involvement, and acknowledges that the military child has unique needs.

Just as everyone attends school and takes away a slightly different, but enriching, experience, so it is with the added features observers see in the Belle Chasse Academy. Fitzgerald says, "Although it isn't functional, the color scheme of the school has received kudos from the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education."

*Ambitious standards from the earliest grades* is a key phrase in the mission statement of the Belle Chasse Academy. Believing it can be done and taking the necessary steps to get it done are viable ways to obtain a goal, whether in education or construction. •



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