

Safety the Foundation of Expansion at Smith

March 2007

“All hands on deck!” is not a phrase normally heard at an elementary school, but at Katherine Smith Elementary School everyone knows what it means. It means awareness. It means cooperation. It means safety.

With construction moving forward at a number of HISD schools, safety is a priority for the district. In order to protect students, the district has implemented programs that raise awareness about the hazards present on the building sites.

At Smith, Prime Contractors, the company hired to manage the expansion, introduced a safety program that includes a clear perimeter around the site, restrictions on any contact between the workers and the students, and an overall vigilance among everyone. During construction, the work is taking place east of where the students are located, yet they are in close proximity. The plan helps them understand that the boundaries are in place to protect them. “Nobody goes near the site and everything stays closed,” said Principal Gloria Salazar.

Warning signs in both English and Spanish have been placed around the construction area to alert children to stay out. The signs also convey the message through pictures so that younger children who cannot yet read are able to comprehend their meaning.

“Our main goal is to protect every child,” said Amanda Russie, the safety director for Prime Contractors. “This program is offered at every school we build. We were pleased to see such enthusiasm from the administration at Smith Elementary.”

The Smith community welcomed the program and values its importance. “The students are safe and knowledgeable about what is going on around them,” said Salazar. After a visit from Prime Contractors and an informative assembly, the students “are more excited about the construction process and more aware that safety is the foremost issue.” With such enthusiasm at Smith, and schools across the city, the district is once again working to keep its promise to provide students with a safe setting that allows them to focus on their academic endeavors.

To help students and teachers fully engage in the project, Prime Contractors introduced a contest to encourage participation. “Students were invited to create construction-related safety posters that show safety is a team effort,” Russie said. “At Smith, eight classes participated and, instead of one winner receiving the prize, all eight groups enjoyed pizza parties for their efforts.”

Keeping a community safe is not an individual job. At Katherine Smith Elementary School, contractors, administrators, teachers, and students are working together toward the common goal of providing a safe and secure learning environment.

