

LOCAL NEWS

This is how Hawthorne High School is changing itself, both physically and educationally

The school is in the final stages of renovations that will transform the school, officials say, and will show students they are valued.



Hawthorne High School music teacher Adrian Martinez instructs sophomore Christian Villa Corta. (Photo by David Rosenfeld)

A music room at Hawthorne High School is filled with electronic keyboards.

On a Tuesday earlier this month, about 25 students, donning headphones, ran their fingers across the black and white keys, engrossed in their individual musical creations.

ADVERTISING

An advertisement for Sally Hansen Miracle Gel. The top section has an orange background with the Sally Hansen logo in white script and "SELF-MADE BEAUTY" in small black text below it. To the right is the "miracle GEL™" logo in a white circle. The main section has a blue background with the text "GEL-LIKE WEAR" in large white letters, "NOW IN MATTE TOP COAT" in smaller pink letters below it, and a white button with "SHOP NOW" in black text. On the right side of the blue section is a bottle of dark teal nail polish with a black cap that says "STEP 1 COLOR". The bottle has the Sally Hansen logo and "miracle GEL™" on it.

Instructor Adrian Martinez asked the class to pause for a moment — to hear sophomore Christian Villa Corta play a version of Beethoven’s “Für Elise.”

After the sophomore finished, the students all clapped, appreciating his talent. It’s scenes like these that were far rarer, Martinez said, when he was a student here nearly 20 years ago.

“I’ve seen so many changes,” Martinez said. “The campus is more welcoming and more student-driven than ever before. Students are more motivated. It seems more friendly and more controlled.

“Overall,” he added, “it’s a much better environment.”

Hawthorne High School is undergoing a transformation both inside and out. The campus, currently in the second phase of a complete reconstruction, expanded its performing arts program this year, and has opened a new wood-manufacturing technology shop.

“The district would not have invested as much money to build this facility if there weren’t students who really loved it,” said Principal Vanessa Landesfeind, who has been at the school for the past three years.

The physical improvements to the campus represent the final stages of spending under Measure LP, a \$110 million bond Centinela Valley School District voters passed in November 2016. Complete renovations at Hawthorne High should be completed in 2023.

The bond was the [third since 2000 for the district, totaling \\$267 million](#), to pay for state-of-the-art classrooms at Hawthorne, Leuzinger and Lawndale high schools. Most of the construction at the other two campuses has been completed already.

But leading up to the most recent bond measure, some [expressed doubt the district could be trusted](#) with spending large sums of money in light of an ongoing criminal case against former Superintendent Jose Fernandez. A judge is [expected to decide in April whether Fernandez will stand trial](#).

Jan Vogel, executive director of the South Bay Workforce Investment Board, who sits on the Citizens’ Oversight Committee for Measure LP, said the committee has been pleased with the district’s management.

“We’re happy with the costs being held in check and that they’ve been very prudent about how the money is spent,” Vogel said. “That’s what we are most concerned with and appreciative of. Most of the projects have also been completed on a timely basis.”

The district has been working on Hawthorne High’s renovations one-quarter of the campus at time. Half the construction has been completed so far. And soon enough, the school will say goodbye completely to classrooms built in the 1950s, which members of the Beach Boys once occupied — and students still learn in today.

“We have the brand new facility on the east side and the west side is still vintage 1950s,” Landesfeind said during a recent visit. “We call it the historical part of campus.”

The changes to Hawthorne High underscore the district’s efforts to improve the school not just physically, but also educationally.

The school has typically struggled as one of the state’s lowest academically performing high schools. At least half of the students speak English as a second language. About 86 percent receive free or reduced-priced lunches. Around 25 percent go on to four-year colleges.

Landesfeind said the new buildings send a message about how the district values students and learning.

"If you have nice buildings, the kids are happier and they learn better," she said. "Dilapidated schools make unhappy kids."

At the high school's manufacturing lab, for example, students crowded around instructor Lucas Pacheco on March 5, as he demonstrated how to use a computerized milling machine. High-tech equipment — donated by companies such as Northrop Grumman, SpaceX and Chevron — line the lab.

"It (computerized operation) is a very up-and-coming field right now," Pacheco. "There is quite a bit of aerospace need for operators and programmers who have that particular skill."

With about 30 percent of his students likely going on to college, Pacheco has geared his classes to train students with the technical skills they need to start working straight out of high school.

"SpaceX, I believe, really restarted the space revolution," Pacheco said, "at least here locally."

Student Mark Reyes said learning how to use the milling machine has been a lot of fun.

"It's really interesting," Reyes said. "I like working with my hands and programming. I like being creative."

Instructor Doug Galt, meanwhile, said the new the wood manufacturing technology lab — which opened this year — has had a profound influence on the students.

"The biggest impact is psychology," Galt said. "For the students coming in now, it looks like something that someone invested in who cares about them."

When the full campus renovations are completed in about three years, Hawthorne High will have a modern and open environment that resembles a college campus, Landesfeind said.

"You will have more open space and the buildings will form the perimeter," she said.

Landesfeind expanded the school's music program last year, hiring a second instructor and adding new creative outlets, such as a mariachi band.

Martinez, who teaches the mariachi program, said it helps students connect to a culture they might not have explored before.

"It's definitely nice to know we have the support to expose students to new things," Martinez said. "It's one of the toughest things to want so many things that lack support. My experience here has been great."

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David Rosenfeld

David Rosenfeld has been working as a professional journalist for nearly 20 years at newspapers, magazines and websites. He's covered murder trials, interviewed governors and presidential candidates and once did a flip in a biplane for a story assignment. Before joining The Daily Breeze in 2018 to cover El Segundo, Hawthorne and aerospace, he worked at The Beach Reporter in Redondo Beach. In his free time, David loves outdoor sports such as sailing, mountain biking and golfing.

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