



Building Community, Brick by Brick: High School Construction Is About More Than Just Walls

By Kalpana Marothu



“What stands out most from our 14 months on campus isn’t the construction, it’s the people.”

When we first arrived at Mandarin High School in May 2024, we came with a clear mission: to renovate and expand a campus that had served its community for more than three decades. What we didn’t expect was how deeply we’d become part of that community ourselves.

Mandarin High, which opened in 1990, is the third-largest high school in Duval County, serving more than 2,300 students. As part of Duval County Public Schools’ (DCPS) Bold Plan (funded by the half-penny sales tax approved by voters in 2020), the school was slated for a major transformation. The project was ambitious, and the timeline was tight.

The scope of work was extensive: a new 22,000-square-foot expansion along with addressing deferred maintenance items spread throughout the campus. As part of the Deferred Maintenance initiative, we renovated restrooms to meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards, upgraded dressing rooms in the auditorium, replaced aging heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems in classrooms, modernized electrical infrastructure, addressed drainage issues at the softball field, and installed a new bi-directional amplifier/radio signal system to bring the campus up to code. And we did it all while the school remained fully operational.

High schools, we quickly learned, never sleep. From early morning classes to late-night games and performances, Mandarin was always alive with activity. Every task we undertook required careful coordination to avoid disrupting the rhythm of school life. It was a balancing act, one that demanded flexibility, patience, and constant communication. With so much planned construction activity around an active campus, we had to ensure safety of the students was the highest priority.

At the heart of the project was the new classroom addition. Designed to house the school’s Medical Academy and Culinary Arts programs, this space is more than just a building, it’s a launchpad for students pursuing careers in healthcare and the culinary arts. With simulation labs, collaborative learning areas, and industry-grade equipment, these classrooms are built to inspire.

Still, what stands out most from our 14 months on campus isn't the construction, it's the people. Principal Bravo and Assistant Principal Durkin were incredibly supportive and patient. They worked with us through every schedule shift and unexpected hiccup, always with the goal of minimizing disruption for students and staff. We were invited to school events, celebrated at milestone ceremonies, and made to feel like part of the Mustang family.

As we complete the final phase, removing 19 portable classrooms that had stood for over 20 years and preparing an athletic practice field in their place, we are proud of what we've built. But more than that, we are grateful for the relationships we've formed.

And it's because of those relationships that we felt as though we were part of the Mandarin High School community. We



wanted to give back to the school that had given us a transformative experience. Our employees and our family members were invited to participate in a "Day of Service" event on a Saturday. Our team performed much needed maintenance across the campus. Some volunteers painted benches, trashcan holders, clock tower planters, and handrails. Others planted new trees where needed. When the day concluded, we felt like we accomplished something truly special, much in part to the feeling that we were doing something good for the people and students we care about.

As our General Superintendent Jeremiah Perkins often says in project meetings, "Every day in construction is a challenge where you get to solve problems and keep moving forward." At Mandarin High, we did just that, and in the process, we built something far more lasting: we built relationships.



BATSON-COOK
CONSTRUCTION



Batson-Cook.com



@Batson-Cook Construction



@BatsonCookConstruction



@batsoncook