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Executive Director Larry Schanker, of Brookview Montessori School, talks about the \$250,000 the school is receiving from the state for structural updates.

‘We need to do it right’

Brookview Montessori School in the midst of making repairs

By LOUISE WREGE
HP Staff Writer

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Part of Brookview Montessori School is expected to stay closed for at least another school year.

According to Executive Director Larry Schanker, the structural problem found in 2022 in the older part of the school has been fixed, but a new issue came up this spring.

“The building is now structurally sound ... but we need to bring the rest of the building up to code, which means a new HVAC system and a new fire alarm system and all of the electrical work in the ceiling that goes along with that,” Schanker said.

He said the cost will be an additional \$900,000 on top of the \$1.6 million that the original project cost. He said the \$250,000 included for the school in the state’s budget, for the fiscal year starting Oct. 1, will be an incredible boost.

“We are just overjoyed by this,” he said.

Schanker said six of the school’s nine classrooms will remain in the modular classrooms erected in the parking lot for another school year.



Brookview Montessori School in Benton Township is listed in the state’s 2025 budget as receiving \$250,000 for structural updates.

The newer part of the school, which was built in 2000, was not affected by the structural problem and was able to stay open. It has three more classrooms, a cafeteria with kitchen and office space.

“We need this school and this building to be sustainable for the next generation of children, so we need to do it right,” he said.

Adapting classrooms

The older part of the school was built in the 1970s as a Moose Lodge and sat vacant for about 10 years before Brookview Montessori took over the space in the 1990s, said Lee Baez, maintenance supervisor at the school.

Baez said he found the structural

problem, which led to the older part of the building being closed in November 2022. He said the structure was built with 10 vertical glulam beams made of compressed wood connected to steel horizontal beams that held the building up.

“Water had gotten in (the beams)

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and they were starting to kind of sag down and some had rotted away,” Baez said, adding that all of the glulam beams have been replaced with steel beams.

When Baez brought the problem to his attention, Schanker said the school brought in a structural engineer for an in-depth analysis – who said the building was no longer safe.

“Safety always being our highest priority, we knew we had to act immediately,” he said.

For the rest of that school year, he said they moved two primary classrooms to Sarett Nature Center, two toddler classrooms to River of Life School in Benton Harbor and the infant classroom to Woodland Shores Baptist Church in Bridgman.

“But you know what? It worked out great,” Schanker said. “Everyone was so hospitable and the teachers put together such beautiful classrooms in these places.”

When the problem was found in 2022, Schanker said he thought the project would cost \$500,000 and that section of the school could be reopened in a few months. However, that didn’t happen.

“This part of the building was built in the 1970s, so we kept bumping into surprises,” Schanker said.

He said they decided to rent



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Brookview Montessori School Executive Director Larry Schanker talks about the \$250,000 the school is receiving from the state for structural updates. “We need to bring the rest of the building up to code, which means a new HVAC system and a new fire alarm system and all of the electrical work in the ceiling that goes along with that,” Schanker said.

modular classrooms when it became apparent the building wouldn’t be ready for the 2023-24 school year.

“Some of (our parents) were driving to Sarett and then Bridgman to pick up their children,” he said. “We couldn’t ask them to do that for another year.”

He said he was initially apprehensive about how the modular classrooms would look.

“I’m so proud of our teachers, creating these beautiful classrooms from scratch,” Schanker said. “They’re really quite lovely ... but it took a lot, hooking them into the sewer and the electricity.”

A silver lining

Because of the project, Schanker said almost all of

the asbestos has been removed from the building.

“There is very little asbestos left,” he said. “All of our asbestos tile and adhesive has been abated, along with our old boiler, which also contained asbestos.”

To remove the asbestos, the school received a grant from the Frederick S. Upton Foundation.

Schanker said he hopes the building will be ready to open next fall, which will be the 50th anniversary of the school.

Meanwhile, he said they continue to raise money to pay for the construction costs. More information can be found on the school’s website at www.brookviewschool.org.

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