

Gym Plays Key Role at New Catholic School in Montana

The shiny new building with the gleaming basketball floor may look like a gymnasium, but at Great Falls Central Catholic High School in Montana, it's a lot more.

"Our gym has become so much more than we ever expected," said Parker Sullivan, the school's development director. "It is a great selling point for the school, a place for us to hold special events, and it has even become a revenue generator."

The two-story structure, which is 127 feet wide and 108 feet long, is part of the school that was completed in March 2008. The school itself is the answer to many prayers. In 1973, the old school located near downtown Great Falls was closed. Ten years ago, the school began anew, holding classes at the University of Great Falls while money was raised to build a new school.

Finally, in September 2007, construction was begun on Diocesan land just inside the city limits. The decision was made to use a pre-engineered metal building system because of its cost effectiveness and because construction could be done much more quickly than with most other types of construction. Varco Pruden Buildings, a division of BlueScope Buildings North America, www.vp.com, and one of the nation's leading providers of metal building systems, provided the materials for the project.

The construction was done by Great Falls-based AllSteel Building Company, an independent authorized Varco Pruden builder. Ironically, Ralph Beltrone, president of AllSteel, was a member of the last class to graduate from the old school. Obviously, the project had a special significance for him.

Beltrone said one of the biggest challenges was doing the construction during the winter months, which can be particularly demanding in Montana.

"Fortunately, with metal systems, we were able to get the exterior of the building up quickly, so we were able to do the inside work during the toughest months," he said. "Classes were actually being held in the building before we completed the job."

Designed for 150 students, the total size of the project, school and gym combined, is 36,900 square feet. Of course, another challenge was an extremely tight budget. Using pre-engineered metal allowed construction to be completed within the tight budget demands. The builder was able to add interest to the exterior, multiple single-slope roofs, and two different colors of masonry and siding. Natural light was considered to be an integral part of the design; therefore, large windows were incorporated in the classrooms and public areas.

The gym is a separate structure and connected to the school by a commons area, chapel, and media center. The 80 students, in grades 9 through 12, have basketball, volleyball, and gym classes, as well as track and field practice in the gym. There is a weight room on the second-floor mezzanine above the locker rooms.

“Two other Catholic schools use our gym for tournaments, musical recitals, and other events,” said Sullivan. “We also have rented out the gym for family reunions, antique shows, and more. It has even served as a fall-back for some organizations that stage outdoor events and needed a rain shelter in case of bad weather.”