

OLD AND NEW FRIENDS - INCLUDING A NEW YORK YANKEE - HELP CELEBRATE NEW HAVEN'S NEW AMISTAD ACADEMY

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By Abbe Smith, Register Staff

NEW HAVEN – The Amistad Academy community had a lot to be thankful for on Wednesday: The high-performing charter school celebrated its \$34.5 million new school building with a spirited assembly and special visits from an old friend and a new friend.

Amistad co-founder and now Connecticut Commissioner of Education Stefan Pryor stopped by and spoke about the charter academy as a model for successful schools throughout the state.

Students gave an equally warm, if not more ear-piercing, welcome to new Amistad friend Mark Teixeira, first baseman for the New York Yankees.

Both men praised the school, its leadership and the students for breaking barriers and striving for academic excellence.

“What you’ve created here today is 91,000 square feet of hope, opportunity and achievement and 91,000 square feet of what’s possible for the rest of us to do,” Pryor said.

Teixeira told the students they are going to be the leaders of the next generation and said his kids will one day look up to them.

“I know that the state of Connecticut and New Haven has a bright future because of all of the kids in this room,” he said.

Amistad Academy, the flagship school for Achievement First, is a kindergarten through eighth grade school housed in the completely renovated former Dwight School on Edgewood Avenue in New Haven. The renovation project included construction of a two-story addition in the rear of the school, as well as a library, new gymnasium, two courtyards and breakout rooms for small group instruction. The inside of the school is brightly painted and decorated with college banners and inspirational messages like, “Climb the mountain to college.”

Achievement First co-CEO and President Dacia Toll led the dedication, which included musical performances by Amistad students. She pointed out that the Achievement First family, which now includes 19 schools in New Haven, Hartford, Bridgeport and New York, started here with the opening of Amistad Academy in 1999.

“So much more is possible for us as adults who have been given something passionate to dream about and work for and even more importantly for the kids who make it all worth it,” she said.

Teixeira told the kids when he was 10 years old he told his parents he wanted to play baseball in the Major Leagues and they gave him some advice.

“What’s the first thing they told me? Do your homework. Why? Because if you don’t do your homework, I’m not letting you play baseball,” he said.

Teixeira also talked about the importance of going to college and said his time at Georgia Tech were some of the best years of his life.

The dedication ceremony also featured presentations of awards to major donors and legislative leaders. Among those recognized were Education Committee co-chairs state Sen. Andrea Stillman, D-Waterford, and state Rep. Andrew Fleischmann, D-West Hartford, Senate Majority Leader Martin Looney, D-New Haven, state Rep. Toni Walker, D-New Haven, and Senate Minority Leader John McKinney, R-Fairfield. State Sen. Toni Harp, D-New Haven, and state Rep. Sean Williams, R-Watertown, were honored but were not able to attend. Also in attendance was state Rep. Roland Lemar, D-New Haven.

Toll recognized three philanthropist organizations: the Smart Family, William H. Pitt and Steven A. & Alexandra M. Cohen foundations, for their generous contributions to the school, totaling about \$8.5 million. The rest of the money came from state – to the tune of \$26 million. Amistad Academy is the first charter school in Connecticut to receive a state school construction grant on the same terms as a traditional public school. Toll thanked former state Rep. Cameron Staples, who was unable to attend, for his help in securing funding for the project.

Looney called the creation of Amistad Academy in 1999 “the most important single event regarding the state of education in Connecticut in the past 12 years.”

“It started a movement that has been growing and building ever since,” he said.

Pryor praised the students for their hard work and Toll for her strong leadership.

““It’s incredible to think that it’s a dozen years since the founding and thanks to your brilliant and majestic leadership, Ms. Toll, the accomplishments that have occurred here and throughout the Achievement First network are truly breathtaking,” he said.

Construction on the new Amistad Academy started in 2009, led by Fusco Corp., and included 36 percent minority contractors, 23 percent New Haven residents and 9 percent women. Several energy efficiency incentive grants were awarded to the project by United Illuminating and Southern Connecticut Gas Co.