



NEWSphoto By Frank Zayas

Fairington Students Visit Greenhouse

Students from Fairington Elementary School were among the first to visit the new Briarcliff Greenhouse, an extension of the Fernbank Science Center. The facility, actually a series of interconnected greenhouses, contains plants from all over the

world. The center opened recently, and is open to the public on Sundays from 1-5 p.m. Pictured left to right are: third graders Antoine Santiago, Carl Johnson, and Erica Duran, along with Fernbank instructor Sally Hodges.

Trailers here, trailers there; trailers everywhere

By Vivian Dixon

Then school starts on Aug. 9, first-time principal Myisha Williams will be welcoming elementary students to a trailer park, minus flamingos out front. In the brisk growth of subdivisions and apartment complexes around it, the district is expected to have 960 students in the school year starts - twice as many as it was meant to hold. In response, the school will add 31 trailers, the most of any school in the county not undergoing renovations, in the Stone Mountain School System.

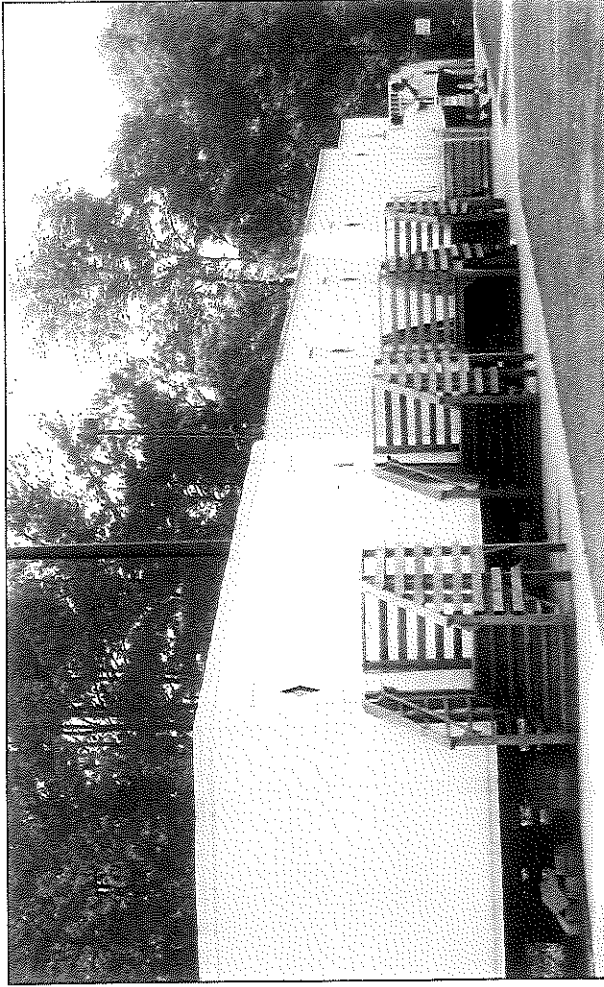
Williams said the trailers are definitely a long-term solution.

"There is not a lot we can do about this time," she said.

Read, she said they will be keeping the class size and ensure that great teachers are teaching the kids inside the trailers.

Fairington trailers are among 749 units - 524 single trailers, 202 modular classrooms and 21 restrooms - that the school will have in place at 51 schools in the county. That's up from 600 portable classrooms in 2002.

Most of the units are in south DeKalb County, where the population increased 954 between 1990 and 2000. The 100,800 students expected to enroll for the 2004-2005 school year, more than 20,000 will have trailers for



Fairington Elementary will have 31 trailers to help accommodate its estimated 960 students when school opens. There are 749 mobile units in use countywide.

their classrooms. This situation exists despite an aggressive building program that yielded 10 new schools and 1,000 new classrooms since 1997, when DeKalb voters approved the one-cent Special Local Option Sales Tax [SPLOST] that financed the construction program.

Still, every year the school system is reduced to playing musical trailers, moving the mobile units from one school to the next or moving them back to locations a year later.

Spencer Ragsdale, a school system spokesman, said that seven years ago the system stopped purchasing new mobile units and now rents them as needed.

The area's population growth keeps

outstripping the school system's best efforts.

For example, when the new state-of-the-art Lithonia High School opened in October 2002, it had 1,800 students - 200 more than it was built to accommodate.

As a result, the school, built at cost of \$18 million, opened with six portable classrooms.

A similar story occurred at Stephenson High School in Stone Mountain when it opened in 1996. Today, Stephenson has 23 trailers. Its 40-acre campus, which was bounded by open fields in every direction, is now surrounded by subdivisions like the 84-home Chester Hills that sits across the road.

Dr. Stanley Pritchett, the school system's associate superintendent of business affairs and plant services, said new subdivisions are bringing new students faster than they can think up new schools. "We got behind," he said.

But he sees hope on the horizon. Pritchett said that the school system is projecting 1,200 new students this year, down from the 2,000 a year it averaged between 1997 and 2001.

Other schools with trailers include Pine Ridge Elementary in Stone Mountain, Rowland Elementary in Decatur and Panola Way in Lithonia.

Together the three will have 48 trailers among them even though the school system is spending millions on expansions to add new classrooms.

McNair, Southwest DeKalb and Towns high schools will also have 92 trailers, but theirs will be temporary.

School officials say most of those trailers are there to temporarily accommodate students while construction of new classrooms is under way.

Ragsdale said trailers are not the system's first choice for housing students, but they are functional.

"They will meet our needs until we can complete construction," he said, At Fairington Elementary, there is no end in sight for its burgeoning student population.

A short distance from the school, Dozier Development plans an additional 2,000 homes on what used to be the Metropolitan golf course.