

EDUCATION

House of the Dragon

Meet the East Bay's newest high school—and its principal, Francis Rojas.

BY LEEANNE JONES



Air-oh-ant. Perhaps the first thing to know about Emerald High School in Dublin is how to pronounce its mascot, the aerouant. On the long, winding road to opening the first new comprehensive high school in Alameda County in more than 50 years, it was the aerouant that kept founding principal Francis Rojas up at night.

A longtime teacher, activities director, and school administrator in Union City and Milpitas, Rojas was eager to involve incoming students in some decisions. They envisioned a serpentine, Eastern-style dragon but needed to avoid “dragon” (as it is the mascot of nearby Valley High School), so they selected a serpent. “Within hours of the announcement, there were emails from the community,” says Rojas. “Like, how dare you bring the devil to Dublin! And don’t you know about Saint Patrick?” Determined, the students googled “Celtic dragon” and pivoted to the antiquated term they found. Says Rojas, “We’ll go by ‘Aeros.’”

A fearsome forest green, navy blue, and silver aerouant illustration commands center court in the new 2,400-seat gymnasium. Other buildings in the three-phase, \$374-million project were built upward, maximizing the snug (around 23-acre) site. Two three-story academic towers connected by a second-story bridge boast 80 classrooms. A mostly book-free library (these digital times), a 137-seat lecture hall, and a



Clockwise from left: Emerald High School principal Francis Rojas has a long history of leadership; Emerald’s aerouant mascot is part of the school logo; Rojas was hired in 2022, while the school site was still under construction.

future 600-seat performing arts theater extend from the student union, an airy indoor/outdoor atrium. There’s also a wellness center with a quiet zone, tactile manipulatives, and breakout rooms for therapy sessions.

For Rojas, the blank slate of a new school is a principal’s dream. “There are lots of opportunities to do good work around changing systems,” he says. “One of the biggest challenges in education is that everyone is an expert. Whether you’re a teacher or a parent, we’ve all gone to school and have ideas about how school should be. I’m not saying that the way we were taught was the right way or wrong way. But times have changed, and it’s hard to change how schools are run.”

Having been vice principal of James Logan High School (in Union City) and principal of

Milpitas High School, each with more than 3,000 students, Rojas brings uniquely relevant experience to Dublin. It was the fastest-growing city in the state from 2010 to 2020, with the student population increasing 92 percent—and development continues east toward Livermore. While only freshmen and sophomores will be on campus this year, as Emerald finishes its second construction phase, the student population will eventually reach around 2,500.

With the major decisions made and students arriving, Rojas’s focus is shifting. He says, “The goal this year is to develop our unique sense of identity and culture as a community.” Perhaps the new students will be inspired by the symbolism of the ancient aerouant: strength, courage, intelligence, and cleverness.