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Academy makes room for 340 displaced students

BY **BERNIE MIXON**
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The gym at Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy has been partitioned into classrooms for middle-schoolers. (Michael E. Keating photo) | [ZOOM](#) |

SYCAMORE TOWNSHIP — From the inside, Steve McCollum's classroom looks the same: Diet Coke can collection intact, striped couch still comfy and Michael Jordan poster on the wall.

It's a scene betrayed only by a basketball hoop and long American flag draping the wall of the gym at Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy High School.

The gym and other rooms now serve as "middle school north" for 340 students displaced when last week's tornado damaged Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy Middle School.

"We are trying to keep as much the same as possible," Diane Blackburn, middle school principal, said Wednesday, the first day for the relocated middle school. "We lost the building, not the school."

The tornado tore away portions of the roof at the school in Symmes Township.

The middle school students will finish the year at the high school.

But Wednesday felt more like a first day of school than almost the end of the year. Balloons and welcoming signs draped every entrance as middle school students arrived.

Following a morning chapel service, middle school students were shown a video of the destruction at their school and the move and set-up at the high school.

Each grade had its own little place carved out: fifth-grade classes were at the field house in weight room and

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locker room space; sixth-graders occupied drama and Bible classrooms and a mini art gallery; seventh and eighth grades were in the gym with "classrooms" partitioned off.

The Lindner Fine Arts Center entrance now serves as the main entrance for middle school students. The theater lobby was turned into a cafeteria and commons area. The coatroom is now the mail room/teacher work room and the will-call area is now the health room.

"It's much better than expected," said Mrs. Blackburn.

Carol Anne Blessing, coordinator of student support services, said the students are adjusting to their new surroundings. "They don't seem apprehensive but there are still some concerns about the storms," she said.

"The students seem excited to be here."

Brad Walker, 13, a seventh-grader, summed up his experience: "It was really easy to find your way around. They've done a great job of separating the rooms. There's not much sound carry over. They provided an area for us to work in that was comfortable."

In Mr. McCollum's class, where a wooden cabinet is filled with nine years' worth of Diet Coke cans given to him by students as they traveled the world, students found some things familiar.

"I wanted to make it as comfortable for them as possible," said Mr. McCollum, who teaches seventh-grade world history and eighth-grade Christian studies. "One of the students said it looked like the tornado picked up the room and dropped it over here."

Familiarity was the goal.

"We have everything we have to have," Mrs. Blackburn said. "We have everything that survived."

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