

OHSWEKEN — When the home and school committee was looking to name School B, there were lots of submissions — most of them had one name.

So when Ivan Thomas became the principal of the \$6.4 million school on Cayuga Road, it also had his name above the door.

After 30 years as principal of School 11, and a longstanding commitment to education, Mr. Thomas was the overwhelming choice for the name of the I.L. Thomas O dadrihonyani ta, or place for reading, said Cheryl Claus, chairperson of the home and school committee.

"You have honored me and humbled me," the 58-year-old principal told more than 200 people who gathered for the official opening Friday morning.

The school Mr. Thomas presides over, is in a part of the community that is predominantly traditional in nature. The building, its contents and students reflect that.

The school is designed to look like a turtle, a significant figure in traditional Longhouse religions.

"I'm not an advocate for buildings in the shape of animals," said Brian Porter, the project architect. "We have no tradition in that. Our people built longhouses."

But it was decided that the school should take the form of a turtle.

It is often a struggle to reflect traditional culture in a modern society, Mr. Porter said. "This building represents that struggle."

For him, the building's expansive roof is more significant as a place for everyone to gather for shelter

Under that roof is the Six Nations Cayuga immersion program. This year, about half of the study body of 250 take their math, history and other subjects in Cayuga.

"I think it's excellent," said Pete Williams, a father of four children in Cayuga immersion.

"They had horrible conditions," in the four old schools, he said.

The students are from Numbers 11, 12, 10, and 6 schools — two of which were one-room schools. About two weeks ago they abandon the old portables

for their new home which about 99 percent finished.

The school reflects the local traditional culture.

The grounds are dotted with endangered and rare plant species being reintroduced to the area.

There is also a greenhouse where a group of teachers plan to grow culturally significant plants.

Mr. Thomas said he hopes the traditional emphasis "give the students more of a sense of identity, more awareness of who they are."

But This is a state-of-the-art school, said Larry Lewis, the vice-principal.

Each classroom has two computers waiting to be linked to one network. The building utilizes a heat pump system to make it energy efficient.

The building is designed to double as a centre of the community. It has a restaurant-quality kitchenette to serve during community events. The community-oriented rooms can be separated from the classrooms at night.

The grounds are good for picnics and holds the closest running track and playground.

Inside, the stage can open to the gymnasium or the library or both.

The construction budget for the school is \$4.8 million but another \$1.6 million was needed for furnishings and to supply quality electrical and gas service to the school.

It was not handed over to a general contractor as would be done normally, but contracted out by the committee, said Mr. Porter. Some work was tendered, some was invited and others were hired on an hourly rate by the committee.

The plan was to maximize the amount of work done by Six Nations community members, he said.

Now as it is finished he said there are "equal parts of happiness, relief and frustration," flowing through him.

The children "are laughing and happy, that makes me happy," said Ms. Claus. The Thomas school is the second of three schools promised after the 1989 school strike when parents kept their children at home to protest the presence of asbestos in the buildings.