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## *School renovation underway in split Sunni-Shia neighborhood*

By Norris Jones  
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**Baghdad, Iraq** –Families in one west Baghdad neighborhood are looking forward to the re-opening of their secondary school.

That facility, which is being doubled in size, sits between a Sunni and Shia area says Maj. Clark Johnson with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers which is overseeing the work.

Local leaders there believe that once the project is finished, that school will help the community refocus on basic fundamental Iraqi priorities such as education and help reconcile their differences, he noted. "They know that the key to success is hard work and education. Just like in the United States, their schools are the heart of their community – a place for hope. And the local council president is very grateful for this investment. He knows the unifying potential it offers residents there."

The existing 13-classroom structure is over 30 years old and little had been invested in maintenance and upkeep. The roof was leaking, some of the classroom floors were buckled, the sidewalks cracked, and the restrooms were in deplorable condition, Johnson noted. "The contractor is repairing the roof, putting in a whole new electrical system, replacing the florescent lights, installing ceiling fans and smoke detectors, renovating the restrooms, repairing and painting all the interior walls, and putting in new floors and sidewalks where needed," he continued.



An Iraqi construction crew is renovating a school in west Baghdad and doubling its size. Currently the project is about 30 percent completed. [U.S. Army photo]

"We're significantly expanding that school as well, constructing 11 additional classrooms and two labs. We're also increasing the size of their playground area installing colored concrete tiles in a new 476 sq. meter area so the students have

more mud-free space for recreation. When we're finished, it's going to have a dramatic impact on the learning environment there." (Thifaf Al Neel School is located near the Baghdad International Airport in the Al Bayaa Beladiya.)

Johnson is currently overseeing a half-dozen other projects involving schools in southern Baghdad Province and that number should double in the near future. "It's very rewarding work helping the Iraqi people rebuild their country. I'm proud to be part of our efforts here."

Johnson is a member of the North Da-

kota Engineer Brigade, 34th Infantry Division, that deployed in April to Iraq. He is a National Guard soldier and for the past 12 years has been the Civil Engineer at Camp Grafton, Devils Lake, N.D. He says his wife Lisa and their two children Stephanie 8, and Daniel 7, understand how important his mission is and have been very supportive during his time away along with the entire community of Devils Lake.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has overseen the renovation of over 100 schools in Baghdad Province in the past four years.

**Note:** Norris Jones is a Public Affairs Specialist with the Gulf Region Central district, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Iraq. For more information, contact him at 540-665-2644 or email requests to [CEGRD.PAO@tac01.usace.army.mil](mailto:CEGRD.PAO@tac01.usace.army.mil). For more information on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Iraq, visit [www.grd.usace.army.mil](http://www.grd.usace.army.mil).