Around 550 Henryville senior and junior high students got the surprise of their lives as their buses approached and then stopped at their new 'school,' the Mid-America Science Park in Scottsburg, early on Monday morning, April 2. Expressions of shock, awe and disbelief were reflected on their young faces as they disembarked and saw a large crowd, most of which wore yellow-and-black Henryville t-shirts in support of the students, who lost the use of their school in their hometown when a tornado struck it on Friday, March 2. They'll be at the MAS Park for at least six weeks, finishing the 2011-12 school year.

Large crowd welcomes Henryville
students to their 'school' at MAS Park on Monday

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"Wow!"; "This is crazy!"; and "Unbelievable!" were among the comments overheard as around 550 junior high and senior high students from Henryville arrived via a caravan of school buses at the Mid-America Science (MAS) Park on a cool, breezy Monday morning, April 2.

Thanks to the efforts of Scottsburg Mayor Bill Graham, city employees, Scottsburg and Sheriff's Department officers, Chamber of Commerce members, the Scottsburg Volunteer Fire Department and staff of the MAS Park, as well as a trio of very impressive motorcycle officers with the Indiana State Police, the kids got a real thrill to start off their long-awaited return to classes.

It's been a whole month since students at the Henryville school complex were let out of classes early on the afternoon of March 2 in the wake of severe storm warnings issued by Louisville-area meteorologists. Thank God they were: Only 30 or so were sheltering from the fast-approaching EF4 tornado that bore down on the school. The tornado hit the cafeteria area first and quickly becoming a "...column of red..." from the brick it absorbed as the building destructed. The storm was responsible for one death in Henryville and several injuries as it and a smaller, companion tornado tore through the northern Clark County community, ripping apart buildings and homes and tossing two school buses as well as other vehicles in their paths.

Henryville residents have been working since to bring a semblance of normalcy to the area, which will be marked for many years because of the storms. One sign of that journey was the arrival of the West Clark district's high school and junior high students to the MAS Park on April

2.

Plans to hold classes for these students from sixth through 12th grades were quickly drawn together by West Clark and Scottsburg officials as well as the State School Superintendent Tony Bennett, a former teacher and coach at Scottsburg High School. Bennett made a personal appearance at the MAS Park the week after the storm struck Henryville, to emphasize West Clark's need of the MAS Park's facilities for Henryville students. It is the only facility large enough in this area that could make school officials' hopes to keep this group of students together come true.

The agreement drawn up for West Clark Community Schools Corporation indicates that the students will have use of the MAS Park's business incubator area until June 15, plenty of time to allow everyone to complete their schooling and for Henryville High School seniors in the Class of 2012 to graduate.

Gold and black balloons tethered to railings at the park's south entrance reflected the Henryville Hornets' school colors as last-minute preparations were completed shortly after 7 a.m. on Monday. A variety of signs welcomed staff and students to their new home, and Chamber members and other community-minded supporters began appearing wearing bright yellow t-shirts which proudly declared, "Scott County Supports Henryville Hornets." Those had been made available by the Greater Scott County Chamber of Commerce for several weeks in anticipation of April 2.

As teachers began arriving around 7:20 a.m., they sometimes had to weave their way through the crowd that was increasing and a herd of Louisville and Indianapolis-based television crews. Reporters and cameramen with WHAS, WLKY, WAVE and WDRB had made the trek up Interstate 65 to be on hand. They were joined by Indianapolis crews from Fox Channel 59, WRTV Channel 6 and Channel 13. Most instructors came with small rolling suitcases, boxes and, in one case, a cart, all filled with teaching aids. Most smiled when greeted at the door by Joe Pearson, the Park's executive director, and Robert Peacock, executive director of the Scott County Economic Development Corporation, which helps the Scottsburg Redevelopment Commission operate the Park.

Pearson and Peacock must have said, "Welcome to Scottsburg!" hundreds of times that morning, leaving Mayor Bill free to walk around and visit with supporters and school officials. Oh, and take dozens of photos with his iPad. He went crazy with his iPad that morning.

Most folks figured the West Clark bus brigade would arrive shortly after 8 a.m. Nope! They finally rolled in off South Lake Road around 8:20 a.m. behind that glitzy group of ISP motorcyclists.

They passed under a huge America flag hoisted aloft by the city's two ladder trucks as they entered MAS Park grounds. And that was the beginning of the surprises this special group of kids got that morning.

As the buses rounded the curve into the back parking lot for unloading, dozens of students' faces were pressed against bus windows. Not a few of them had their mouths agape at the sight of dozens of yellow-shirted people clapping at their appearance.

Some students appeared absolutely delighted with the reception. Others ranged from shock to awe. Young girls giggled. Kids laughed. And there were those few "cool" students who walked nonchalantly by the crowd of unofficial cheerleaders.

And then, all the hype was done. Scottsburg Student Council members who had lined up with greeters shared candy they had hoped Henryville students would accept. Some did, of course, but there was plenty left over for the Council to have a little celebration of its own for a job well

done.

No news reporters and cameramen were allowed inside the Park that morning. Students had a general meeting awaiting them before they reported to their classes, it was learned.

By the end of this week, HHS and HJHS students will have learned their new schedules and, hopefully, be just a notch higher on that ladder to normalcy.

Welcome, Hornets, glad to have you here!