

Making the Grade column, East Side Monthly, May, 2006 © East Side Monthly, Sam Zurier

In previous columns, I have described how the Providence Public Schools do not adequately served our neighborhood, arguing that this disengagement has weakened our ties to the City as a whole. Recent events described elsewhere in this month's East Side Monthly have produced a near-disaster followed by a golden opportunity for the East Side and the Providence Public Schools to restore a once-strong relationship. To sustain this promising change in direction, people need to step forward and help.

When many East Siders learned of the School Board's decision to close Nathan Bishop in favor of a "temporary" high school, they focused on the short-term impacts to the neighborhood, generating the greatest amount of coverage in the *Providence Journal*. At the same time, another group focused on how the School Department's decision would affect the future of public education on the East Side. Nathan Bishop Middle School has been burdened with serious problems for many years; however, the pending resolution presented the possibility of ending any hope to bring a better school to that location in the near future. Indeed, conversations in the first week of the crisis included persistent rumors that the City of Providence planned to sell the Nathan Bishop building following the conclusion of the "temporary" high school. If the Nathan Bishop site were placed on the real estate market, it is unlikely that any other nearby location could be found for a neighborhood public school. Instead, public middle education would effectively be banished from the East Side, the immediate neighborhood would be stripped of both elementary and middle schools, and Providence would be one step closer to becoming the next Hartford or Detroit.

For many of us, this bleak vision of the East Side's future evoked memories of the graveyard presented by the Ghost of Christmas Future in *A Christmas Carol*, or the image of

Pottersville presented in *It's A Wonderful Life*. The scene also brought to my mind a headline from the 1970's adapted to a new grim setting: "Providence to East Side: Drop Dead."

In advocating for stronger public education on the East Side, this group pressed the School Department to honor its basic commitment of community and parent engagement." In recent years, that commitment has been largely a one-way street, in which volunteers from the East Side have gone into public schools elsewhere in the City to help, without a public school presence for our neighborhood's children. Our neighborhood's children have not attended Nathan Bishop because of the school's struggles, and the School Department has assumed that the East Side's disengagement has been the result of a lack of interest in public education in general, not Nathan Bishop's struggles in particular.

It therefore became the East Side's burden to demonstrate an interest in public education. A core group of supporters made dozens of telephone calls and sent hundreds of emails into cyberspace, and scores of friends and neighbors sent back messages of support. A number of people formed the East Side Education Coalition, establishing a website at www.EastSideEd.org. During the critical three weeks of School Board deliberations, this group filled the telephone lines and the Information Superhighway with messages and dialogue in order to raise everyone's awareness of how important public education on the East Side is to the well-being of the families and children in the neighborhood, the public school system as a whole, the neighborhood's ties with the rest of the City and the City as a whole. From a starting point of no organization or common position, many people came together to present a strong and unified message. Based on this message, the School Board and the School Department took the historic step of committing publicly to the restoration of quality public education at Nathan Bishop in a new school to open at that location in the fall of 2007.

Much has been accomplished, but there is much more to do. For the new school to have the best chance for success, the entire East Side needs to become fully invested and engaged. Parents who are considering public education need to step forward and say what they want in a new school. Neighbors who understand the value of a good public school need to step forward and indicate their support for this project. East Siders who understand the connection between strong public education and the City's overall health need to step forward and urge the School Department and the Mayor's office to stay on task. Anyone interested in helping can contact the EastSideEd website at the above address, or contact me at MakingTheGrade@verizon.net. With your help, we provide a valuable legacy to our neighborhood and our children.