

*Making the Grade* column, East Side Monthly, August, 2008 © East Side Monthly, Sam Zurier

When we walk or drive by the corner of Sessions and Elmgrove these days, we can see or hear the results of construction activity at the Nathan Bishop Middle School. From the outside, the Sessions Street entry and its concrete steps have been dismantled, to be replaced at a later time. Inside the building (and out of sight from passersby), construction workers are busy removing asbestos and reconfiguring the interior in the first phase of construction. The abatement work is scheduled to last through the summer, and upon its conclusion the more visible changes to the building will start to occur.

While the current phase of construction is less obvious, it presents a tangible sign of the expected opening of the New Nathan Bishop in the Fall of 2009. As some of us may remember, the current construction work marks the successful culmination navigation of a long path of challenges. The original DeYoung facilities report for the Providence Public Schools proposed closing the Nathan Bishop Middle School and releasing the real estate for other uses, based upon our neighborhood's disengagement from the public schools during the last quarter of the 1900's. Families on the East Side made the case that the renewed interest in Vartan Gregorian Elementary School presented a window for return and growth, and the City agreed to add a new Nathan Bishop to its facilities plan. Last year, a new crisis arose when the General Assembly enacted a moratorium on funding for school construction projects; however, at the last minute the Assembly created a window for projects submitted prior to December 31, 2007, and Nathan Bishop's application was filed and accepted within these parameters. There were other major twists and turns as well; for example, the Providence Preservation Society took an active role in influencing the City's decision to renovate the existing building, rather than demolish the 1929 structure in favor of a new structure.

In tandem with this construction work, a series of committees have worked with the Providence School Department to design a program for the school that will provide a model for middle school reform throughout the District. In the Fall of 2006, three committees produced reports that laid out a basic structure for the new Nathan Bishop that rests on three pillars: (1) full implementation of the middle school concept (providing a bridge for students from the intimacy and comfort of the elementary school classroom to the variety and intellectual growth of varied student schedules, opening the first year with the sixth grade class only to permit the introduction of a school culture, etc.), (2) an *a la carte* advanced academic program that welcomes every student in the neighborhood, while allowing each student to pursue his or own individual strengths to the greatest possible extent, and (3) an autonomous governance structure, under which the school's administration and faculty can manage their own staffing and budgeting decisions. The Superintendent accepted these major decisions, and appointed a committee to fit the new school's programs within the structures recognized by the School Department's policies and contractual obligations.

The Steering Committee spent much of the past year dealing with one particularly difficult contractual issue, namely the extent of autonomy that the new school will hold. The teachers' contract places a baseline requirement on public schools that teacher seniority determine teacher assignments, permitting senior teachers at one school to displace their junior colleagues through a "job fair."

During the second half of 2007, the School Department was optimistic that pending contract negotiations would authorize the establishment of three new schools that would be freed from the burdens of the "job fair." Following Boston's model of "pilot schools", the new Providence "pioneer schools" would be governed by a board of school personnel, parents and

community members, and would retain the authority to hire and manage faculty outside of the constraints of the teachers' contract and School Department policies. Boston's "pilot school" program has produced many successes for that district, and the School Department was optimistic that the negotiating parties would agree on this concept for Providence.

Unfortunately, we learned by the end of 2007 that the teachers' contract was not going to be resolved soon, and the concept of "pioneer schools" had not survived the latest round of negotiations.

The School Department is now pursuing an alternative plan for the New Nathan Bishop, based on a provision in the current contract (which remains effect after expiring last year) called "site-based management." Under this template, a school which seeks greater autonomy can organize a committee, present a plan, and seek approval from a School Department review board that is staffed by both administration and union officials. While the "pilot school" program provides a template for autonomy that each school can adapt, the "site based management" program calls for each school to develop its own plan, which must include specific references to every portion of the existing contract for which the school seeks a change or a waiver. Because of the complexity of that contract, the planning process for a site-based managed school must be thorough and meticulous. The Planning Committee for the New Nathan Bishop will begin this work in September, developing an overall plan for the school that will be presented for approval early in 2009.

In the meantime, the School Department has posted an advertisement for the principal of the new school. Interviews are expected to take place over the summer, and the successful candidate may be identified by this fall. Originally, we had hoped the District would hire the principal to begin working full time this fall, so that she or he could help plan the school from

the beginning. Unfortunately, the District's budget difficulties prevented this from happening, although there is still hope that limited funds will be released to hire the incoming principal on a consulting basis to assist in this year's planning process. The job posting includes a special addendum that describes the new school's distinctive mission, which we hope will attract a candidate who can help to establish the "model school" that would succeed in restoring middle school education to our neighborhood and providing programs that can be introduced to the rest of the District as well.

As this description suggests, it takes a lot of hard work to plan a school that can overcome many of the constraints presented by current contractual provisions and existing policies. For the past two years, a committed group of people has been working steadily to address these challenges. From time to time, the broader community of parents and East Siders have helped to move this process along by pressing public officials for the full return of quality public education at all levels to our neighborhood. While there are still many pitfalls ahead, the successes over the past two years provide hope for a successful opening of the New Nathan Bishop in the Fall of 2009, and the integration of that new school into family life and overall fabric of the greater East Side in the years to come.