

*Making the Grade* column, East Side Monthly, January, 2009 © East Side Monthly, Sam Zurier

Until recently, it has been a common assumption that the East Side was largely disengaged from public education. When I served on the School Board during 2000-02, there was an urban legend that the mayor delivered a speech at a parochial school graduation ceremony in which he commended and thanked those assembled for the fact that “you pay our taxes without using our services.” This viewpoint contributed to the School Department’s decision, in the Spring of 2006, that it was not worth retaining the Nathan Bishop Middle School.

Most of us can remember how the closing of Nathan Bishop energized the parents and members of our neighborhood, and created a movement to bring back an improved middle school to the East Side. East Side parents with children in our neighborhood’s two elementary schools, Martin Luther King and Vartan Gregorian, petitioned the School Department for a quality middle school to continue their children’s public education. They were joined by many other parents of children in private and parochial schools who wanted a more inclusive (and less expensive) alternative. As the School Department formed planning committees and the City engaged an architect to renovate the structure, the neighborhood adopted the mantra that “if you build it, we will come.”

As we move into 2009, it soon will be possible to gauge the neighborhood’s response to the new school. During these months, parents will have the opportunity to register their children for the public schools in general, and Nathan Bishop in particular. Of the 200 students expected to enroll in next year’s opening sixth grade class, up to 160 (or 80%) are available to students from the Greater East Side neighborhood, with the balance available to other Providence students. To fill these neighborhood seats, Nathan Bishop will have to draw a large number of

children who otherwise would attend private or parochial schools.

The School Department took a major step to support the new school's success in November, when it named Michael Lazzareschi of Martin Luther King Elementary School as the principal of the New Nathan Bishop. Named as a Rhode Island Principal of the Year in 2007, Mr. Lazzareschi has a strong track record of success to bring to his new responsibilities, which will officially begin in February. In the meantime, he and the School Department have taken the bold (and in my memory unprecedented) step of actively competing for the privilege of providing our neighborhood's children with a quality public education.

Just before Thanksgiving, Principal Lazzareschi hosted around 75 parents at the King School to present a preview of the new school's program. While our private schools can produce glossy written materials and elaborate videos, Mr. Lazzareschi countered with a Power Point presentation that emphasized several of the new school's strengths, including its facility (which is being built to high production standards), his own record, and the vision for the school's program developed through the committee work over the past few years.

Most of the parents in attendance have fifth-grade children who are eligible to enroll in the school next year. After Mr. Lazzareschi's presentation, he fielded questions for around an hour. The audience was respectful and appreciative, but the questions were substantive and searching. While covering a broad range of topics, the great majority of the questions focused on two particular areas, namely teacher quality and advanced academic programming.

The parents' focus on these two issues could be expected. In 2001, the School Board commissioned Professor Darrell West of Brown University to survey Providence parents of children in private schools. When asked the reasons for their choice of school, the largest group (90%) identified teacher quality as a critical issue. Professor West also asked these parents what

change in the public schools would most encourage them to send their children there. The top selection (58%) was “gifted programming.” These findings supported the work of the Nathan Bishop committees organized by Superintendent Evans in the summer and fall of 2006, who listed hiring autonomy and “a la carte” advanced programming as key features of the new school. At the forum, Mr. Lazzareschi assured the parents that the new school would have good teachers. East Side parents, however, have a sophisticated understanding of the personnel issues that face our public schools. The audience pressed him for specific information about the process by which the new school would be staffed. Parents asked if the contractual provisions that allowed Providence teachers to choose their own positions at many District schools on the basis of seniority would prevail at Bishop as well. They asked if Bishop would achieve the autonomy of “site based management.” Mr. Lazzareschi promised to provide more specific information as soon as it was available.

Mr. Lazzareschi described the new school’s planned math program, which will allow students to study Algebra I in the seventh grade and Geometry in the eighth grade if they are ready, in courses that will satisfy high school requirements. He said that the rest of the new school’s curriculum was being developed. The School Department’s chief academic officer provided an update on the district’s efforts to upgrade its curriculum for all middle schools in the coming years, but parents noted the lack of specific information about how the Nathan Bishop children will be able to take courses in all subjects that are taught each student’s level of ability. The School Department agreed to provide more specific information soon.

From a long-term perspective, the Providence School Department has achieved a number of impressive gains with the new Nathan Bishop: a fine facility, an excellent principal and an unprecedented outreach program to the neighborhood. With a first public meeting complete, the

District knows what it must do to “close the deal” with the neighborhood’s parents: namely, address the important issues of teacher quality and advanced/accelerated academic programming.

It is not easy for the Providence School Department, with its emphasis on system-wide initiatives, to develop a model school with new ideas that ultimately can benefit the entire District. Nathan Bishop’s recent history of particularly difficult struggles has created a “blank slate” for the District, and the parents of the East Side have a new interest in the public schools, if the right school is available. While important issues remain, I see the glass as being at least half full, and the level is rising.