

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

Early last month, Michael Lazzareschi, the principal of the New Nathan Bishop, held a community meeting to provide an update about the school. After the briefing concluded, Mr. Lazzareschi invited parents of incoming students to stay to help organize the new school's Parent-Teacher Organization, or PTO. Around 30 parents stayed, and I remained to watch. (My youngest son is in the sixth grade this year, so he is not eligible to enroll at the new school.)

The principal's idea of calling this meeting was a bold one. To begin with, a PTO requires the involvement of teachers, and the hiring process for the new school's teachers has not yet begun. (As I discussed in last month's column, the Commissioner of Education has ordered Providence to give Principal Lazzareschi the authority to select his own faculty, and the procedures for that are still being developed. Mr. Lazzareschi's email box is currently filled with inquiries from teachers who want to apply.) With that said, Principal Lazzareschi decided that the new school's parents were ready to get started, and he decided to give them a chance to get involved.

In competing for students against the East Side's well-established private schools, as well as a well-regarded program at Nathanael Greene, Mr. Lazzareschi has relied upon parents' willingness to make a decision based on the new school's promise rather than its track record. For many parents, the vision of the New Nathan Bishop can be hard to grasp, just as the vision of a beautifully renovated school building, as rendered by the project architects, can be difficult to envision when one drives by the construction site at Sessions and Elmgrove. It was therefore no surprise that there were questions at the community briefing concerning the building, which Councilman Cliff Wood answered with assurances that he sees the construction schedule producing the desired result at the proper time.

In light of the natural concerns many parents could have about the new school's lack of institutions and traditions, one might have not been optimistic about the prospects of signing parents up for the PTO half a year before the new school's opening. In fact, however, it was refreshing and exciting to see how many parents were eager to come to such a meeting.

Principal Lazzareschi began by separating the parents into three groups, and asking each group to develop a job description for the PTO and a vision for the new school. The parents who attended comprised a cross-section of the East Side, including parents of children in public, private and parochial schools from different neighborhoods.

From these separate groups and varied communities, common themes arose. The parents shared the goals of providing financial support and moral support for the school, building lines of communication among the children, the educators and community partners. The parents committed themselves to writing grants and facilitating networks that will help to enrich the academic programs given during the school day, and the supplementary programs (sports, music, drama, and so forth) that can be offered after school.

In a similar way, the three parent subgroups offered converging visions for the "look and feel" of the new school that they wanted for their children. The three top items on each group's list were academic achievement, a positive atmosphere and the promotion of diversity. These goals are compatible with those of the Providence Public Schools in general, and thus a departure from the perception held by many Providence residents from other neighborhoods, who consider all East Side families and children to be elitist.

As the meeting progressed, the parents identified a set of shared project goals, anointed two brave souls as provisional leaders, defined a process for parents to sign up on the governing

board or steering committee, and established a communication network to help move the effort forward. Among this group I saw parents who have been active in neighborhood sports leagues, Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts, elementary school PTO's and the East Side Public Education Coalition. It is a high-powered team with a track record of organization and accomplishment.

These parents made an important commitment to their children, the new school and to our neighborhood. Many of our private schools are "safe" choices, in that they represent a known product which can operate on its own, with parents able to choose how much of their time to contribute to the school and its community. In contrast, public education makes demands upon parents, as issues arise that call for parents to "get involved" for the good of their children or for the good of the school. The parents who attended the initial PTO meeting for the New Nathan Bishop did not view this involvement as a burden; instead, they saw it as an opportunity to add to the quality of their children's experience, and to their own.

The New Nathan Bishop may help to bring about changes in the neighborhood's private schools. With the re-opening of this school (as well as the current economic pressures that reduce the pool of students who can afford private school tuition), private middle schools are reviewing their own programs, and in some cases are looking at offering students the option of advanced courses. Competition between our public and private schools can bring benefits on both sides of the public versus private ledger.

While the New Nathan Bishop's first and most important benefits will flow to the new school's students, the potential energy generated by the PTO promises other, wider changes as well. These parents plan to work with Principal Lazzareschi to bring the neighborhood and local institutions into the school, so that the East Side can become re-engaged in public education (as predicted by an *East Side Monthly* editorial a few months ago).

More generally, our elected officials and community leaders have spoken for many years about how our public schools are in many ways our government's most important program, holding the greatest potential for bringing to all of our children the opportunity to realize the American Dream. The organizational meeting of the New Nathan Bishop's Parent-Teacher Organization reminded us of another important truth, namely that our public schools can be important for bringing adults together as well as our children, in a project that brings benefits to children, family and community.