

School 16 strives for neighborhood feel against the odds

SCHOOL 16

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From the perspective of the Rochester City School District, the students at John Walton Spencer School 16 return “home” to their building on Post Avenue this school year after an extended stay

in swing space.

For nearly all those children, though, the 19th Ward building, a community anchor on the west end of Aberdeen Square since 1910, is hardly home at all. The school was in swing space for so long that the current sixth-graders were the only students who ever attended class on Post Avenue back in 2011-12.

See **SCHOOL 16** , Page **16A**

TIME TO EDUCATE

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Continued from Page 1A

They were in prekindergarten, which then was housed in portable trailers rather than the deteriorating building itself.

“I never went in here,” sixth-grader Summer Carr said after a tour of the renovated building. “Maybe just to go to the nurse’s office.”

The school’s long sojourn at the Freddie Thomas campus on Scio Street is illustrative of how the district has attempted, not always successfully, to balance several coinciding projects:

- The need to renovate and replace its aging facilities through the ongoing billion- dollar Facilities Modernization Program.
- The desire for neighborhood schools with a strong connection to the surrounding community.
- Its ongoing search for a student placement paradigm that is equitable, cost-effective and, above all, comprehensible to parents. At one point it seemed School 16 would never reopen at all, but rather would merge into other schools. That plan was eventually scuttled, one of several affecting schools in the 19th Ward and other city neighborhoods. Instead, Lincoln Park School 44, half a mile to the northwest, is now being considered for closure. The 19th Ward Community Association and Southwest Common Council Education Committee have been advocating for its schools since at least 2012, when the neighborhood stood to lose both School 16 and the Walter Cooper Academy on Congress Avenue.

“We’ve been stubborn in keeping at this,” one of the leading advocates, John Boutet, said. “Most people would just give up.”

‘Everything is different’

Most of School 16’s time in exile was spent sorting out political questions. Actual construction on Post Avenue took less than 18 months and resulted in a remarkable blend of historic and modern elements.

“Everything is different from the old school,” sixth-grader China Steward said. “The old school was all dirty. Like, the bathrooms — I used to have to wait to go home to use it.”

The architects retained a number of historic features of the building as well as a great deal of original woodwork and glass. The old gymnasium is now the library, while the new gymnasium and cafeteria are together in one wing of the building that can be accessed separately for neighborhood activities.

That area includes a spacious foyer with sky-high ceilings and faux brownstone stoops meant to recall Sesame Street. There is state-of-the-art space for prekindergarten, sinks in all the classrooms and the huge storage closet the art teacher requested.

“There’s a real Rochester feeling in

Continued on next page

Amy Schramm, an art teacher at School 16, unpacks mounds of boxes as she sets up her room in the reopened school. Students have spent five years in a swing space as this location was renovated. JAMIE GERMANO/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE