

New paint, and hard work ahead

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ABSTRACT

A good private school is a fine thing as far as it goes, but a vibrant public school, especially a neighborhood school, is much more.

FULL TEXT

The public K-8 school in my neighborhood, closed for renovations for the past two-plus years, reopened on Thursday morning. The kids, who had been riding buses to and from a temporary location, were glad to be walking or biking to school again. Students and parents wandered excitedly through the halls, trying to take in the full scope of the transformation: new wing, new floor, new library and gym and cafeteria and playgrounds, a radically revised layout that made for many excellent new ways to get from here to there. Even the parts that hadn't been rebuilt from scratch looked and smelled different -- fresh, upgraded, somehow more important than they used to be.

The teachers looked happy and relieved to be back where they belonged. The superintendent looked even more relieved. The renovation had taken longer, cost more, and caused more contention than expected. A spectacularly crabby abutter from central casting hadn't helped. But now everyone was exclaiming proudly over the lovely swan of a school building that had miraculously emerged from a 1960s-era ugly duckling. The design and execution of the renovation had been creative, even inspired.

Passing each other in the halls, parents exchanged triumphant looks and comments. This is what you pay taxes for -- a public place that sends a clear message to a community, especially its children, that we can work together to make a good life for ourselves. Whether you tend toward the individual self-betterment pole or the polity-and-progress pole of the sickly spectrum that dominates our national conversation, you couldn't walk through this vital, energetic scene without appreciating that there are some absolutely necessary things we can accomplish only by working together beyond narrow self-interest. A good private school is a fine thing as far as it goes, but a vibrant public school, especially a neighborhood school, is much more. It's not just a place where kids learn and get ahead; it's where citizens are made, both a sign and an engine of a community's continuing viability.

I realize that not everybody gets to have this feeling. I grew up in a neighborhood with lousy public schools. My parents, having bought a relatively inexpensive house there, saved enough money to send their sons to private school, buying me a shot at a good education that a lot of kids in the neighborhood didn't get. My wife and I took the opposite approach, overpaying to live in a neighborhood where we could count on the public schools to give our kids a shot at a good education.

Money counts for more than ever in defining life chances in our increasingly divided society, and there's no question that money spent on tuition or a mortgage can improve the odds in schooling, but it only buys you a shot at a good education, not the education itself. The kids still have to go and get that, and all the support and prodding and tax dollars in the world won't do the work for them.

Which brings me to what's missing in our fine new school building. It's lovely, but it's too neat, and it smells wrong. Don't get me wrong: It smells like a million bucks. The library and gym have a tang of freshly varnished wood; the

hallways and classrooms have a crisp, sharp new-building smell without the underlying musk of sweat and dinge that pervaded the school before the renovation.

But I'm looking forward to the return of that musk. A school, even a well-kept one, should smell like effort, like humanity, like desperation as well as inspiration. And there should be clutter, too -- student projects displayed on the walls, books everywhere, stacks of papers collecting in desks and piling up in the corners of classrooms as students crank out more and more work. A school should look and smell like a place where young people and their teachers work hard because the stakes are high and because they owe it to themselves, each other, and the community that's counting on them.

Carlo Rotella's column appears regularly in the Globe. His latest book is "Playing in Time: Essays, Profiles, and Other True Stories."

Credit: By Carlo Rotella

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