

New schools are community anchors

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) October 12, 2017



With the start of the 2017-2018 school year, some 82,000-plus Baltimore City schoolchildren have returned to their classrooms and the next round of academic adventures and challenges. As the result of the Baltimore 21st Century Schools initiative, some of the children have the benefit of now doing their work in brand new school buildings.

As a reminder, the Baltimore 21st Century Schools program is the result of 2013 legislation signed by Gov. Martin O'Malley providing approximately \$1 billion for the renovation or replacement of Baltimore City school buildings. The massive construction effort is now being overseen by four partners: the City of Baltimore, the city School Board, the state's Interagency Committee on School Construction and the Maryland Stadium Authority.

After several years of planning and setting priorities for the program that is expected to take a decade to complete, the first fruits of the effort are being enjoyed. New schools that have opened for this academic year are Fort Washington Elementary/ Middle School in the Berea neighborhood in East Baltimore and the completely renovated Frederick Elementary School serving Southwest Baltimore's Mill Hill area.

I'm more familiar with the work taking place along Linden Avenue just above North Avenue in the Reservoir Hill community. There, the John Eager Howard Elementary School, where I volunteered for a few years helping to run a lunchtime newspaper club, is nearing the completion of a \$33 million combined renovation and new construction project. Renamed the Dorothy I. Height Elementary/Middle School, the new facility will be welcoming students beginning in the 2018 spring semester.

While the John Eager Howard building was undergoing a transformation, its students were assigned to the Westside Elementary School, about a mile to the west in the Penn North neighborhood. When these students return to the new Reservoir Hill facility in 2018, along with the Westside pupils who may be transferred, school enrollment is expected to be about 240. However, in the following year enrollment is projected to grow to 470 and Dorothy I. Height can be expected to be a vibrant and valuable community anchor.

Projects can be catalysts

This is where Baltimore City's INSPIRE program comes in. The city's Department of Planning has been conducting a program involving the neighborhoods around each of the new or renovated schools. Designated INSPIRE, this planning initiative has been focusing on the area within the quarter-mile radius surrounding each of the schools. Working with the communities, it hopes to enhance the connections between the school and the neighborhood.

The INSPIRE planning will attempt to incorporate the neighborhood's vision for specific public improvements as well as guiding private investments that may be made in the area.

Looking at the INSPIRE plan adopted early this year for the area around the new Dorothy I. Height school, we see a wide range of initiatives — from identifying safe walking routes to school, accompanied by an ambitious street tree planting program, to developing a stronger, pedestrian-friendly connections to nearby Druid Hill Park. In all, the INSPIRE plan has identified 32 projects or opportunities to pursue. Here is a small sampling:

- Recognizing the recent demolition of the Madison Park North housing complex, the plan seeks to encourage the developers to create short-term greening improvements while the vacant site awaits new development;
- Noting the Mount Royal Mansion on Park Avenue, the planners want to explore the redevelopment of the historic structure for community use. Indeed, students at Morgan State University have already studied new uses for the building, including a community arts center, meeting rooms, gallery space and even some space for artists' residences.
- Enhancing German Park, a neighborhood park that received a major boost in 2011 through the involvement of KaBOOM!, a national nonprofit dedicated to child's play, and the Baltimore Ravens All Community Team Foundation. Through the planning process residents stressed their interest in greater recreational opportunities for their children. Planning for further improvement to this park is
- Enhancing access to healthy foods, including giving attention to the available offerings at retail stores close to the school, this initiative can also take advantage of the nearby Whitelock Farm, a community-operated vegetable garden that offers fresh food options for its neighbors.

These efforts in the Reservoir Hill neighborhood, an historic area with many assets along with many familiar challenges, should be emulated, in their own unique ways, by communities across Baltimore City where significant investments are being made in new or substantially renovated school buildings. In this way, the nearly \$1 billion invested in the school buildings can serve as a catalyst for significant new public and private investments and stronger neighborhoods.

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