

The Darien Review

School Opens Without Hitch;
Old Building Used Since '27

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The first day of classes in the new high school off Middlesex Rd. financed by a \$3 million bond issue two years ago, thus was held on schedule – despite some misgivings that the contractors' work might not be sufficiently advanced to permit use of the building at this time.

Following last minute checks by school administrative officials and members of the Board of Education the school was judged "ready for use", but only on a modified daily session. Students attending the classes are being dismissed two hours earlier, at 12:30 p.m. this week, but it is expected that normal hours will be resumed next week, according to Dr. Stewart B. Atkinson, principal.

Still to be completed are the cafeteria, the gymnasium, and portions of the following class areas: music, woodshop, power mechanics, electronics, and general metals. The longest delay is expected in finishing the gymnasium and adjacent locker room areas, according to Dr. Atkinson, work to be done in the latter areas includes installation of electricity and lockers and completion of the flooring.

Dr. Atkinson, though doubtful of its completion on time, said the school staff hopes that the "gymnasium will be completed before the end of the basketball season this year ... to give townspeople an opportunity to see the gymnasium in use."

Building Inspector Michael DeLeonardis twice checked the school in the waning days of December and gave clearance of occupancy preceding the opening of school on Monday morning. Inspection for final clearance of the music wing will be held by Mr. DeLeonardis shortly.

"Smooth" Transfer

Transfer into the new building was a "smooth one", according to Thomas E. Golden, Jr., chairman of the General School Planning and Building Committee. Mr. Golden, who said the town had made a "good buy", landing the Dan Deering Co, of Norwalk for overcoming a three-month construction delay caused by freezing conditions of last winter.

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Credit also was given by Mr. Golden to several town departments consulted during the course of the planning and building. First Selectman Thomas F. Kerrigan praised the Committee, noting that it had “spent many hours” on the project.

Mr. Golden declared that the Committee members handling the high school project “are still in business” to “clear up any deficiencies which might arise” and that many “bugs” still have to be removed in the next six months.

Formal dedication will be held in February, Mr. Golden said, in dictating that plans are still indefinite. A “simple ceremony” will be held and guided tours will be part of the program, he added.

Double Sessions End

Occupancy of the new school ends double sessions started last fall in the secondary schools. The old senior high building on Renshaw Rd. now becomes a second junior high school allowing regular sessions in the two buildings. About 850 students use the new high school building.

In reviewing advantages of the new building over the old school on Renshaw Rd. Dr Atkinson singled out the faculty offices for each of the school’s six departments, the roominess of the library and the cafeteria; and the functional aspects of the new guidance and administration set-up.

The new faculty offices eliminate the practice of holding parent-teacher conferences in such impractical places as portions of the auditorium etc. Dr Atkinson pointed out, adding that the offices also may be used for work of a more private nature by the teachers. The closeness of the guidance and administration departments was described as “an efficient layout” by the principal.

Overcrowded conditions in the old library have been overcome, and the new library should be able to handle the student needs for “many years to come,” Dr. Atkinson pointed out. He added that the new cafeteria will be able to handle 1,200 students, twice as many as were handled in the old cafeteria. Used by the students on opening day, the library has a blue-gray tile, is lighted through high vertical windows, and is equipped with blond furniture.

Another improvement over the old building is the classroom to main office communications system, according to Dr. Helen N. Merritt. Previously, the communication was handled from the main office. Dr. Merritt, head of the Social Studies Dept., noted better lighting, more adequate space, as other improvements over the old building. In the latter respect, she noted that the classrooms were “shallower” than in the other school, thus making easier the presentation of lecture material.

Mrs. Doris Field, high school nurse and director of health services, pointed out that the new nurse offices have separate rooms for girls and boys. The number of cots has been increased from two to five, and the new privacy probably will encourage students to make fuller use of health services. Another advantage is that the nurses’ office can be isolated from the resting rooms, she pointed out.

Students expressed a great liking for the new building as they walked from class to class through corridors with pastel walls, or over sidewalks covered with corrugated roofing material. They noted, however, that “traffic” conditions within the building were difficult where A and C wings merge.

Administrators agreed, noting that the area looked “like Times Square on New Year’s Eve” when students were clanging classes on the first day. However, they pointed out, the situation eased considerably on the second day and it is expected that this is another “wrinkle” that will be ironed out in time.

Design for the five basic structures was provided by Ketchum & Sharp, a New York architectural firm. Landscape architects were Tregenza & Bingelow also of New York. Construction of the school designed to handle an enrollment of 1000 or even 1200 with the use of special facilities began 14 months ago.

Before ground could be broken, the town held two referenda over the cost of the school. The school plan, with full estimates placed around \$4 million, was defeated in the first referendum in 1957. A new building committed was created after the plan’s defeat; plans were revised and a lesser bond issue was asked. In the second test in 1958, voters approved a \$3 million structure. A big factor in the controversy created was the search for a school site and others favoring the use of Irving Woods now owned by the town and slated for park use.

The present high school site – served by new roads from Middlesex Rd. Hollow Tree Ridge Rd. and Noroton Ave. Extension – consists of 37 acres and is more than twice the size of the tract bought by the town in 1925 for the old high school.

Approved in 1925

Opposition to the purchase of acreage lying off the Post Rd. and owned by the Wee Burn Country Club failed to materialize at a town meeting on Oct. 16, 1925, and the Board of Selectman was authorized to borrow \$21,600. Dr. W. D. McDonald, chairman of the Darien School Committee, presented a resolution calling for completion of the high school within a year.

Action on construction funds was taken unanimously on April 26, 1926, at a special town meeting in Royle School which lasted only 25 minutes. It was resolved that the cost of the building was “not to exceed \$300,000.

At the special meeting, Supt. Of Schools Edward H. Fuller showed slides of the plans and offered explanations. A building committee was appointed and consisted of Walter E. Irving; the Rev. James J. McGuane, Clarence W Bell, Louis H Kirk, and C. Ernest Lounsbury, together with all school board members.

In a study on the need for the Renshaw Rd. high school, it was noted that “agitation” for the high school had begun in 1921, and that Stamford and Norwalk had “served notice” on Darien that after September of 1925 they would accept no more Darien students.

The building proposed by the Darien School Committee was signed for junior and senior high use; pupils could attend “without crowding” and considerably more could be accommodated by crowding and using the auditorium for study purposes, it was said. When a million dollar addition was built in 1952, pupil capacity was raised to 650.

In recommending the construction the Committee noted: “It should be of interest to the citizens of Darien to know that many educationally progressive communities of 10,000 population or less, with in the metropolitan area, have adopted or are planning to adopt this Junior-Senior High School type of secondary school education.”

Architects for the school were Starrett and VanVleck, and the contract was awarded to the Hewlett Co. of Bridgeport. The cornerstone was laid on March 9, 1927; school opened on Sept. 7; and dedication was held on Oct. 29, 1927. Over 800 people attended the dedication ceremonies in which A. B. Meredith of Hartford, State Commissioner of Education, was the guest speaker.