Parents at DC Elementary School Demand Classrooms with Walls

For three years, parents at Bruce-Monroe Elementary School in the District of Columbia have been demanding facility improvements. First and foremost on the list are walls.

Walls? Yup. Bruce Monroe is one of 23 schools in Washington, DC that does not have walls separating classrooms. The building was remodeled decades ago, as part of an experiment in “open floor plans.” School systems across the country tried such plans during the 1960s and 1970s, hoping that taking down the walls between grades and classrooms would encourage students and teachers to collaborate and work across age and subject groupings.

But as far as Bruce Monroe teachers and students are concerned, the experiment hasn’t worked. And indeed, in schools across the country, districts have moved away from open floor plans, saying that the anticipated benefits haven’t materialized. In fact, conditions for learning in the open space classrooms are difficult: it’s hard to hear, and impossible to find space for small group activities and quiet studying. For the past three years, parents and teachers have been working together to pressure District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) administrators to follow suit.

In addition to demanding enclosed classrooms, parents at Bruce Monroe have a list of facilities problems, including asbestos that must be removed and windows that need replacing. Under No Child Left Behind, Bruce-Monroe was designated as a low-performing school. But there have been no resources or support to help turn around that designation. Parents who decided to stick with the school and help improve it are facing a brick wall, (no pun intended). In addition, budget cuts are having a devastating impact on local schools.

Bruce-Monroe already lacks a librarian, and the next round of cuts will force them to cut additional staff. They may have to choose between providing children with art, music or gym.

There have been a few small wins in the past couple of years: a back gate was installed, some of the darkened windows have been replaced (although the job will not be completed until FY 07-08), and there is now a crossing guard assigned to the school. However, despite the obvious urgency of addressing the unresolved issues—issues that impact not only children’s ability to learn but also their health—and despite repeated promises from district officials, there has been very little action.

A Long, Documented History of Inaction

Beginning in April 2001, a multiracial group of parents, calling themselves Parents and Friends of Bruce-Monroe, began a campaign writing petitions, making phone calls, sending e-mails and visiting the superintendent’s office to insist on the renovations. Officials from the DCPS Office of Facilities promised to begin construction in the summer of 2001, in fact announcing that $1.4 million had been set aside for the work. And that’s just when those promises began to be broken. Three years later, there are still no walls.

Luckily, Parents and Friends of Bruce Monroe have kept records of each communication, each promise made and each promise broken by the district. The result is a chronology that demonstrates just how hard these parents and teachers have worked, how persistent they have been, how dedicated they’ve been to working through the system, and why they are so ready to raise the decibel level of the debate now.

This year, supported by the Tellin’ Stories Project of Teaching for Change,
Parents and Friends of Bruce Monroe decided that the time for talk was over.

"We Want Walls!"
On May 25th, 2004 parents took to the streets. They gathered in front of Bruce Monroe chanting “We Want Walls!” in both English and Spanish. The action brought out Bruce Monroe Principal Marta Palacios who said that she, too, was frustrated. She noted that the school had been closed to summer programs for each of the past 3 summers so that renovations could be done. But each September has arrived with the school untouched, and only “one story after another” from the district about why nothing was done. DC School Board member Julie Mikuta joined the protest briefly, and City Council member Jim Graham came and addressed the group.

The parent’s rally was covered by the local media, and drew a response from the district’s Assistant Superintendent John McCoy. While he was unable to explain the delay in renovations at the school, he announced that work was scheduled to begin on June 1. Parents, hopeful that the broken promises would end, left the action, vowing to be back at the school on June 1.

Good News, Bad News, Still Fired Up
On June 1st, contractors arrived to begin the asbestos abatement work. The work is scheduled to take 3-5 weeks. That’s the good news.

The bad news, according to Jill Weiler of Tellin’ Stories, is that the walls are still not going up. The community group met with DCPS officials, including an Assistant Su-

perintendent on June 2nd, and were told by a representative of the Office of Facilities that, other than the asbestos abatement, no additional work will be done until after September 15th, when the school board and city council have reconvened after their summer break. Once again, the school is slated to be closed for the summer, displacing a summer school program to help neighborhood kids stay on top of their studies.

DCPS now claims that the district must go through its normal process of securing a bid for a contractor to work on the renovations. The bid must be posted for 30 days, a general contractor selected, and then approved by both the school board and the city council.

Parents are furious with the latest delay. While the process of securing a bid is not new, and makes sense, parents wonder why it never seems to get underway, even after funding has been secured for the project. This isn’t the first time that the district’s bidding process has held up the project. And yet in the past, despite assurances that the process was underway, nothing has happened. But this time, parents aren’t letting go. The day after the meeting, several parents went to the Office of Facilities and literally stood over an official’s shoulder while she sent the “high priority requisition order” to the district finance office for approval.

Weiler says parents aren’t going to let the issue rest. “It’s incredibly difficult to stay motivated, when year after year it’s been the same old frustrating story,” she says. “But we’re determined to keep on it.” The group is meeting now to assess its options during the summer, and plan for additional activities both through the summer and when school reopens in the fall.

Tellin’ Stories of Teaching for Change: 202-588-7207 and www.teachingforchange.org