



Preserving Pennsylvania's schools

STORIES

By Nicole Belolan

From historian Linder Kerber's institution of "Republican Motherhood" – through which antebellum mothers strived to nurture the country's future leaders – to the seminal autobiography "The Education of Henry Adams" – in which the author takes stock of his life's learning (and lack thereof) – dedication to educational standards and goals has manifested itself in many ways throughout American history.

At a local level and in contemporary times, the preservation and commitment to communities' historic school buildings maintain and invigorate those long-held standards of educational excellence. Two Pennsylvania communities recently recognized the need to preserve their historic schools: Troy Senior High School in Bradford Co. plans to replace its energy-inefficient windows and complete other renovations, and the Mifflin Elementary School at Lincoln Place, Allegheny Co., recently completed extensive renovations, an action that was prompted by circumstances such as a growing student population and the need to comply with Americans with Disabilities Act standards.

As surely as antebellum American mothers strove to enrich their children's educational needs and Adams critiqued his own education within the larger context of his nation's heritage, both the Troy Area SD

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and the Mifflin Elementary communities are preserving their pasts to provide the best education possible for their children's futures.

Situated on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, Lincoln Place allows what Theresa Colaizzi, Mifflin board representative, describes as "hard-working citizens" to enjoy the conveniences associated with urban areas in "a suburb atmosphere" surrounded by farmland. Colaizzi notes that the school, impressively situated on the top of a hill, is "the center of life [and] the center of education" in Lincoln Place.

Built in 1932 by Link, Weber and Brower, the Art Moderne Mifflin Elementary School replaced a 1900 frame structure and served all ages until 1955. According to Mifflin's National Register of Historic Places application, Link, Weber and Brower were "known for their accomplished ecclesiastical

work." The most substantial alteration to the school was a 14-room expansion in 1956. The school was listed on the National Register in 1985 and is recognized by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation for its architectural significance. Today, Mifflin Elementary serves about 320 students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

In response to the recent burgeoning of the Mifflin School's student population, administrators, community members and Pittsburgh board members sought a way to address its growing pains. Strada, the design firm that was hired to complete the 2001-04 Mifflin renovations, identified several issues, including accessibility, circulation, preservation and community connection as important aspects to be addressed. While a new building was considered, the \$11.8 million reconstruction estimate contributed to the reason the community chose to execute the less-costly \$8 million improvements to the existing school.

According to Strada, the firm endeavored to "preserve all the aspects of historic character" by reinforcing its status in the



This page, top left, Troy Senior High School in Bradford Co.; center, Troy school in 1938; bottom left, Troy school in 1960.

Opposite page, top, Mifflin Elementary School before renovation; bottom, Mifflin school after renovations.



when the reality of an “overflowing” school was examined. Furthermore, adequate space for a new building was nowhere to be found, and any structure built further from the center of the community would result in more students having to be transported by bus.

The Troy Area Senior High School also is undergoing extensive renovations that involve such improvements as additions and updates to electrical, plumbing and HVAC systems. The total cost is about \$22.8 million, which is significantly lower than the estimated \$30 million cost for a new facility. The prized aspect of this project, however, is

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neighborhood as “an accessible and welcoming beacon of art and community – an iconic centerpiece for the neighborhood.” The school’s rehabilitation featured a building-wide renovation, a 17,000-square-foot addition, a new street façade and a conversion of the school into a more environmentally friendly structure. Strada’s work earned a 2005 Historic Preservation Award (administered by Preservation Pennsylvania in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Bureau for Historic Preservation) and a 2006 Preservation Pennsylvania Historic Preservation Award, among others.

In addition to Strada earning professional accolades for the renovations, community leaders expressed praise for the work as well. Colaizzi notes that Strada’s work appropriately preserved “some of the old stuff [such as the playground] – so kids still feel like kids.” Similarly, at a dedication ceremony, former Mifflin teacher Dolores Sebastian described the school as the “hub and heart of Lincoln Place.” These sentiments reinforce the Mifflin school’s importance to the Lincoln Place community. As such, there was no opposition to the renovation

the proposed window-replacement component. The integration of historically accurate windows produced similar interest among community members and inspired stewardship of the prized educational building.

One of two public schools to serve western Bradford Co. in the early 20th century and the only early 20th-century public school extant in the area, Lawrie and Green built Troy Senior High School between 1923 and 1924, replacing an earlier school lost to a 1922 fire. Lawrie and Green also designed significant institutions such as the Pennsylvania State Farm Show Complex and the State Museum of Pennsylvania. The school’s National Register nomination deems it “evocative of [George] Washington’s Mount Vernon” and a “rare example of Colonial Revival-style school architecture.” The Troy school benefited from additions in 1936, 1939 and 1954, as well as a 1974 renovation. Currently, the high school serves about 620 students. The school was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2001.

This recent nomination suggests the impact that the school has had on the community over the

years. Not only is the Troy school supported by its current taxpayers, employees and parents of school-aged children, but the school also boasts support from Troy Area School District Foundation and the Bradford County Historical Society. Furthermore, when Troy first produced wooden cutouts of its community buildings, the senior high school was the first local structure to be so honored. Evan Williams, president of the foundation, explains that the school “has been the center of a lot of activities” and “the focal point for as long as [he] can remember.” Even for those who are newer to the community, says Superintendent Robert Grantier, the school serves as the community’s “foundation – the rock.” Because of this, the community wants the school to “look the way it did.”

Grassroots support reflects what Grantier describes as “a stable area” and a “small, entrenched farming community.” Due in part to this base, installing historically inaccurate windows or erecting a modern building was “never a consideration,” Grantier says. The superintendent further explains that the 1970s-era windows “truly disrupted the whole of the building,” and “the community want[s] it to look like 1923.” The window project will cost about \$588,000 and will be executed by Crabtree, Rohrbaugh & Associates. A grant application currently is pending in the Pennsylvania Bureau for Historic Preservation to help subsidize the cost of the historic window replacement.

In addition to the fact that rebuilding was not cost-effective, Grantier notes that, “inside, it’s a 21st-century school,” fully capable of meeting educational needs. To complement that, the preserved exterior “shows future kids what the past is about,” motivating and inspiring them to pursue their goals. Similarly, Williams explains that respecting the historicity of a community’s school “can provide a source of pride to the memory of community

and students, which should encourage them to live up to the school’s espoused educational standards.”

Representative of education across the commonwealth, the Mifflin school and Troy school espouse and promote the stewardship of their buildings. Colaizzi suggests the vast amount of natural light that pours into the building enables students’ minds to be “open [and] clear.” Similarly, Grantier says, “[i]t’s important to remember your past” because it “lights the way of the future.”

While considerably fewer alterations will be made to the high school, both communities expressed similar enthusiasm for the historically

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sensitive projects. As with any substantial and costly public education project, all those concerned – from taxpayers to teachers – influenced the ultimate decisions. Large-scale and costly community projects often lead to unproductive divisiveness. However, when the project at hand is at the heart of a community – such as renovations to architecturally distinctive and universally cherished schools – these disparate parties can find common ground. In the case of the Mifflin and Troy renovations, that common ground is a shared history and sense of place identified by each community. To address the need for change as well as the intention to preserve community heritage, both the Mifflin and Troy schools have embraced the past with an eye toward the expectations of the future. **B**

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