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Premier city school has it all, except many students

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Long before there were selective enrollment high schools for Chicago's brightest students, there were two schools of choice for the college-bound: Lindblom on the South Side and Lane Tech on the North Side.

But while Lane Tech flourished, Lindblom began to fade in the '80s, tarnished by violence in its surrounding West Englewood neighborhood, declining enrollment, changing leadership and aging interior.

School officials closed Lindblom in 2003 to update the building, and it's scheduled to reopen in September as a premier math and science college prep high school--the city's only such public school.

Now its new principal is scrambling to get students interested in the Lindblom Math and Science Academy, where the surrounding neighborhood is notable for its crime, not good schools.

So far, about 25 freshmen, the only class that will be accepted the first year, have enrolled for the fall--at least 125 students short of the goal.

"First thing's recruitment," said Alan Mather, Lindblom's enthusiastic principal. The 19-year veteran of Chicago Public Schools and former assistant principal of Northside College Prep was tapped to lead the school two weeks ago.

"This is going to be a place where people are going to want to go," he said.

Mather knows he has to move fast.

To recruit students to the new school, which boasts a rich tradition in the city, Mather is holding informational forums. About 20 prospective students and their parents showed up at the first one Thursday.

Guillermo Garcia, who lives on the city's North Side, was there. He is eager to enroll his 8th-grade son even though the family lives in Albany Park.

His son did not get accepted into Northside College Prep, where his daughter attends and where Mather recently worked.

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Garcia said he respects Mather. And that outweighs his feelings about the troubled neighborhood or the 18 miles his son will have to travel to Lindblom, at 6130 S. Wolcott Ave.

"It does not matter that it's so far," he said in Spanish, adding that he and his wife would take turns driving their son to and from school. "It will be worth it."

A second recruitment meeting will be held at 6 p.m. Wednesday at Simeon Career Academy, 8147 S. Vincennes Ave. on the South Side. Another will be held at 6 p.m. Thursday at Haines Elementary School, 247 W. 23rd Pl. in Chinatown.

At the first meeting, a parent immediately asked Mather, "What about security?"

That issue has plagued the school for years.

"There was always a reluctance to walk through Englewood," said Alphonso Kennedy, a math teacher at Lindblom since 1963.

To address those concerns, Mather said he has already met with the Chicago Police Department to talk about a security strategy. Meanwhile, school district officials plan to ask the Chicago Transit Authority to stage buses near the school at dismissal time, curbing the potential for after-school violence.

"Just the improvements that I am talking about will make the Lindblom campus much better than it was before," said Andres Durbak, director of safety and security for the school system. "What we are doing now is a result of lessons we've learned."

Mather said he thinks the lack of publicity about the school's reopening as a selective enrollment school also has hurt enrollment.

Last year, 12,196 students sought slots at Chicago's eight selective enrollment high schools for the 2005-06 school year. Lindblom was one of the choices.

About 1,089 students expressed an interest in attending Lindblom, but when 124 acceptance letters went out from the central office, only a dozen or so students initially enrolled.

In addition to community meetings, officials have mailed out pitches touting Lindblom's offerings to the 1,051 student applicants who were not accepted into any of the city's selective enrollment high schools.

A school divided

When Lindblom closed, the school's sophomores, juniors and seniors were transferred to a temporary location, a small elementary school on East 37th Street. Current students suspect that confidence in the school may have been lost when it abruptly shut down for renovations and the student body was split up.

After that difficult year, marked by student violence and a former principal being escorted out of the school after allegations of financial misconduct, many students opted to attend other high schools.

Ronald Shaw, who lives in Englewood, has attended Lindblom since the 7th grade (when it closed, it housed 7th through 12th grades) and is now a junior at the temporary school, a skeletal version of Lindblom.

Despite the school's recent academic achievements, he said it's been a tough two years.

"I love Lindblom," the teen said. "The only reason I am still coming to this school is because I imagine myself in the new building next year."

Students complain about how they missed out on some sports events and other regular high school activities while at the small building.

Other juniors like Shaw are wondering what their senior year will be like. Only this year's 55 juniors will move to the original building, which ultimately will house at least 1,500 students.

For these soon-to-be seniors, big questions include whether they will be able to have a decent prom with such a small class.

Lindblom teachers have questions too.

The teachers at Lindblom will have to reapply for their jobs, upsetting some of the veteran staff.

'You have to have substance'

Members of Lindblom's strong alumni network watch the changes with interest.

Homer Turner, class of 1978, expects the changes will boost Lindblom's image. "Hopefully the renovation is the key to get students in," he said. "I am all for it, but you have to have more than renovations. You have to have substance too."

When it opens, the school will boast nine fully equipped science labs, seven computer labs and experts recruited from the math and science fields.

Mather is hoping to lure Asian students to the school, which will feature a Chinese language program, a staple at many of the city's better-performing high schools and perhaps a draw for native Chinese students. District leaders would like a diverse student body in what was once a predominantly African-American school.

Mather intends to involve parents and teachers in the school as well.

"This can be an anchor to the community," said Mather as he wandered around the school for the first time two weeks ago, gingerly stepping over cords and wires and ducking beneath scaffolding. The school, in the last phase of its \$40 million renovation, looked like a construction zone.

As he peeked through the darkened hallways and into half-finished classrooms with hardwood floors not yet sanded, he found some surprises. He declared the wood paneling in the library "amazing." He found a cavernous dance room with a small stage and skylights that had been covered for many years. The covered windows would be opened for the start of school and the room would be bathed in light again, he promised.

And Mather could not stop gushing about the architectural details.

"Isn't it amazing? What an incredible structure," he said, stepping into Keller Hall, a 1,500-seat auditorium with state-of-the-art visual, audio and lighting equipment.

When he arrived at the front of the school, he commented on how distasteful it was to him that the

principal's office always seems to be hidden from visitors.

But when he arrived at what is to be his office, he discovered a second door that led to the outside hallway.

"Oh good," he said, noting his preference of being accessible. "I could keep it open."

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