

The New Haven Register (nhregister.com), Serving New Haven, CT

News > New Haven

Tale of Two Schools: Eli Whitney Tech vs. A.I. Prince Tech

Sunday, November 15, 2009

By Ann DeMatteo, Assistant Metro Editor

When Daeson Benjamin was a freshman at A.I. Prince Technical High School in Hartford, he asked himself why he was taking classes at a dank, decrepit school. Now, four years later, the school is big, clean and bright.

“You feel free. It’s not too congested. It’s something to brag about,” said Benjamin, 17, a senior from Bloomfield who is majoring in advanced manufacturing.

But 39 miles to the south, the students and staff at Eli Whitney Technical High School in Hamden wonder if they’re ever going to see the new school that’s been promised to them over and over again.

“They say it every other year,” said Sharcola Osborn, 17, a junior who studies hairdressing.

She likes Eli Whitney, but wishes she had a better environment and more products to work with in her classroom.

Hairdressing and cosmetology is popular at Eli Whitney, but instructor JoAnne Cobb said her students don’t feel safe.

“You have to watch out for the windows. We have problems with the plumbing. We’re constantly getting leaks,” Cobb said in a room where two panels of lights flicker and two of the five sinks don’t always work.

In the plumbing shop, students are excited about learning a trade that will provide them with good jobs in the future. But because their classroom is so warm — like the halls and many other rooms — a teacher-installed air conditioning unit goes full blast.

“It’s hard to teach over the noise, ... classes can’t hear,” said Paul Angelucci, plumbing teacher and union representative. “Everything is antiquated and rundown.”

Angelucci and the leaders of the State Vocational Federation of Teachers are asking questions about the delays connected to the renovation of Eli Whitney, one of the oldest technical high schools, built at Jones Road and Fairview Avenue in 1956.

The union also wants to know how Eli Whitney, in the pipeline for repair since 2002, has been left behind while other technical high schools, Prince Tech being one of them, have been fixed up, according to Rick Tanasi, president of the State Vocational Federation of Teachers.

“The trigger that’s pushed everyone over the edge,” Tanasi said, is the \$180 million commitment Gov. M. Jodi Rell has made to build Gateway Community College in downtown New Haven.

Pat Ciccone, the interim superintendent of the Connecticut Technical High School System, said Eli Whitney has been on a priority list, though other schools such as Prince, Norwich Technical High School and W.F. Kaynor in Waterbury were fixed up first. Ciccone said the schools were probably done in the right order and had been on the list ahead of Eli Whitney.

Eli Whitney's renovation was approved by the General Assembly in 2002, and the legislators authorized \$74.3 million for it in 2006. The cost jumped to \$98 million, an amount authorized in 2008, said Thomas Murphy, spokesman for the state Department of Education.

The state Department of Public Works oversees the technical high schools and delayed the bid opening for Eli Whitney when the state budget wasn't resolved earlier this year.

"Unfortunately due to the state's economic crisis, the governor's budget required the school district to delay construction on five new projects," Murphy said, referring to Eli Whitney, H.H. Ellis in Danielson, J.M. Wright in Stamford, H.C. Wilcox in Meriden and Emmett O'Brien in Ansonia.

In 2010, Eli Whitney will be first on the list along with Ellis Tech, Ciccone said. She will try to "talk to folks in Hartford to try to keep (them) on the front burner so when the economy opens up, they can move forward."

Eli Whitney is inviting parents and alumni to the school at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday so they can be brought up to speed about the status of the building. Parents, students and the public are signing petitions to urge the state to spend money for the school.

"It's difficult to offer students a premier education in a school that has clearly left its premium days behind it," said Eli Whitney Principal Steve Anderson. He added that it's difficult to offer a full education in a physically compromised building.

"It's unfair to the kids," said Tanasi. "We want our teachers to teach in an environment that's healthy and safe, with resources to do their jobs."

A department head at the school, George Reichert, said that the electrical system in a good portion of the academic wing is so antiquated that if four rooms of computers are on, a circuit breaker sometimes trips and students lose an entire period of work.

In some cases, students aren't learning trades on up-to-date equipment, Anderson said.

Windows are open, even on cold days, because sometimes rooms are stifling. Science teacher Dan Niver and his classes returned on a recent Monday morning to find all the fish in the fish tank dead.

"It was 130 degrees in here. They were boiled by the heat," said Niver.

Eli Whitney's 507 students are primarily low-income minorities. Anderson said they overcame obstacles in their lives to attend the school.

"The kids here are wonderful, but when you walk through the front door and see peeling paint, what's the message? You're saying to poor kids: 'This is the best we can give you,'" Anderson said. "I want what's best for my kids."

And the same kids, many of whom live in New Haven, see that their neighbors are going to newly redone schools.

"They rebuilt New Haven public schools before they rebuilt a state school. It's wrong," said Bianca Colon, 15, a sophomore who studies plumbing.

"I feel embarrassed to say I come here. We have cockroaches," said Jasmin Figueroa, 15, a freshman from New Haven.

Said Ciccone, "I want all our students to have what they need and have a learning community and physical environment that is conducive to learning."

THINGS TO COME

The demographics are similar at Prince Tech in Hartford. Forty-five percent are black, 48 percent are Hispanic and the rest are white or Asian.

But Prince Tech's 582 students, who come from Hartford, East Hartford, Manchester, Bloomfield, Windsor, Wethersfield, Berlin and Bolton, are now learning in a "Taj Mahal" that has undergone a \$78 million renovation.

Prince Tech, opened in 1960, expanded from 200,000 square feet to 307,000 square feet because the renovation included the takeover of the former Hartford State Technical College building.

The school provides a full academic and trades program, and even has playing fields. The fields behind Eli Whitney are unusable, but will be reconstructed.

There is terrazzo tile and granite counters throughout, but Principal William Chaffin said "it's meant to evoke the idea that kids will learn the technical things, the physics of it."

The state Department of Public Works picks the construction materials, and the goal is to choose materials that will last, Chaffin said. Union officials and Ciccone note that school maintenance and emergency repair budgets have been reduced because of the economy.

Chaffin doesn't know why his school was rebuilt before Eli Whitney, but he did say that in 2003, the school was unsafe. "It was atrocious," he said.

Prince Tech has an open design, tall ceilings and skylights. There's a lecture hall with auditorium-style seating, a large gymnasium and a fitness center. The library expanded from 800 square feet to 4,000 square feet. Each classroom has an overhead LCD projector.

The hairdressing and cosmetology area is spacious, with enough equipment for students. Science labs also are modern, compared to Eli Whitney, where the sinks and gas jets are broken.

Eli Whitney is 178,763 square feet and hasn't been substantially updated since 1980. Under the repair plan, about 111,000 square feet would be renovated and there will be 118,000 square feet of new construction. New academic and trade wings would be built. The school would get a new media center, fitness center and auditorium. The roof and exterior doors and windows would be replaced.

But despite the rundown physical plant, Ciccone said the students and staff are doing great things.

"It's a school that breaks your heart. ... Imagine what they can do in a building like Prince," she said.

Ann DeMatteo can be reached at adematteo@nhregister.com or 203-789-5716.

URL: http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2009/11/15/news/new_haven/doc4aff7b748b387708767942.pt

© 2009 nhregister.com, a **Journal Register** Property