

New middle school offers fresh hope in S.F.'s Bayview

By **Jill Tucker** Updated 11:22 pm, Monday, August 17, 2015



Photo: Connor Radnovich / Photos By Connor Radnovich / The Chronicle

"Professor Mathmattox" raises his fists and student Mahe Malaki mimics him at the new Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School, which now serves only sixth-graders but will add seventh- and eighth-graders in the next two years.

For decades, San Francisco education officials watched as students poured out of the Bayview neighborhood every morning, leaving behind the poorer, more neglected and more crime-ridden southeast side of the city in search of better teachers, better classrooms, better schools.

On Monday, not only were dozens of students staying put in the Bayview on the first day of school, but the flow was at least partially reversed, with some families opting to commute into the neighborhood to attend **Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School**, the city's first new school in 10 years. What had been something of a gamble appeared to be paying off.

Despite countless reform efforts and the infusion of millions of dollars to boost test scores and the reputation of Bayview schools, success never stuck. Parents and community members were frustrated. Schools across town, infused with parent donations and full enrollment, were the good ones. Bayview had what many believed were the bad ones.

At Willie Brown, the district decided to go all in, building the newest, most well-equipped, fully staffed, high-tech, modern school in the district in a less-than-desirable location. Officials spared few expenses in building the \$55 million campus, with three-story buildings covered with windows as well as courtyard and terraces opening up to vivid views of the bay.

Every teacher has at least three years of experience, and every student has a computer. The colorful plastic chairs, which vary depending on the class, are ergonomically designed, most with wheels to allow students to easily move in and out o

teams. The classrooms and cafeteria took a cue from the city's tech firms, with high ceilings, wide-open spaces and colorful decor.

The school has a "maker" space with roll-up doors like a garage that open up to the inner courtyard. There is an engineering classroom, cafeteria, art studio, gym, medical suite and more. The only things left from the old school, which was on the same site, is the name and the large, bronze, cross-armed statue of Willie Brown, former mayor and current Chronicle columnist.

"This is precursor to what it's going to look like in all our middle schools, Superintendent **Richard Carranza** said as he visited the school Monday morning. "Usually, kids get a set of books. Here, they're going to get a laptop."

Computerized classrooms

Indeed, the usual stacks of textbooks were absent, and in their place were large rolling carts full of iPads and Chromebooks.

As the 216 enrolled students filed through the doors, Carranza and other district officials expressed relief. The lights were on, the paint was dry, and the sixth-grade class was full. The school will add the seventh and eighth grades over the next two years.

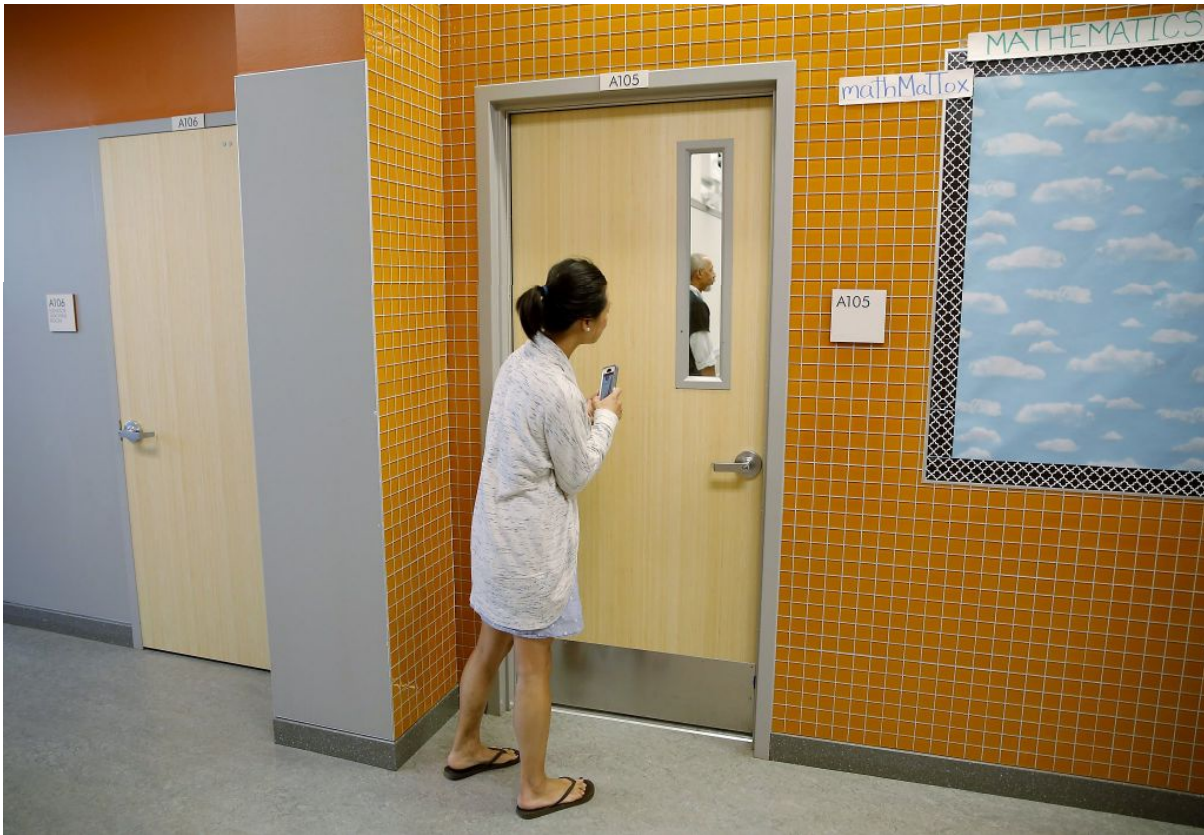
The students are diverse. While the old **Willie Brown school** was almost 70 percent African American, the new one is 41 percent black and 25 percent Latino, with the remaining third white, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander and other students.

Any stigma associated with the school appeared to have been bulldozed with the old building. There was some trepidation, but that appeared to be related to first-day jitters and the typical preteen anticipation of homework.

"I'm really excited, but yeah, I'm sad since summer has ended," **Ajani Washington** said as he headed to his first-period class. "This school is a really good school. My parents were dreaming about me coming to this school."

When the district tore down the old Willie L. Brown Jr. **College Preparatory Academy**, the fourth-through-eighth-grade public school with 160 students, it was severely under-enrolled and posted some of the lowest test scores in the state. The building was old and violated code, with undrinkable water flowing out of lead-filled pipes.

The plan was for the new school to offer fully wired and computerized classrooms, as well as classes in robotics, computer programming, art, music and other college-prep coursework. But it would be built on the same Bayview block where daytime crime in years past would send the school into lockdown. If they built it, would anyone come?



Cindy Harrington looks into the classroom her son is in during the first day of school at Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School in San Francisco, California, on Monday, Aug. 17, 2015.

District officials didn't take any chances. They held community meetings, and school board members knocked on doors. Then, in the spring, the district offered a golden ticket to entice families. Those attending the new middle school would have first dibs at the high school of their choice, bypassing the district's competitive lottery system.

Overcoming old reputation

Families started signing up. It helped that a baby boom in San Francisco was hitting the middle-school grades, filling every sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade classroom in the city to capacity and leaving folks little wiggle room to change their minds.

Still, mom **Cindy Harrington** was sold on Willie Brown even before she knew about the district's high school sweetener.

"We chose to come here," she said, adding that her son, Dominic, 11, will be commuting into the Bayview from the Outer Mission.

Harrington and her husband liked the idea of being part of the inaugural group at the new school, where excitement and enthusiasm were strong. They also liked that the sixth-graders would be the only ones on campus this year.

And they were undeterred by the negative reputation that the old Willie Brown school had.

"I think a school is what you make it," she said. "Every school can be a great school. We're going to make sure this is one as well."