TC community school teaching its first ABCs

by Emily Neil

Teachers College’s Community School has officially opened with 50 kindergarten students, and plans for a permanent space are now finalized.

The school is currently sharing space at P.S. 133 Fred R. Moore School, located at 130th Street and 5th Ave. Construction plans for the school’s permanent site are now complete, and officials say they hope to begin classes next fall at 168 Morningside Ave., located between 126th and 127th streets.

The move to the new location is significant because the school came out of the University’s Community Benefits Agreement, created in the wake of the University’s Manhattanville expansion plans, in which the University promised to provide the neighborhood with a public school covering pre-K through eighth grade. But the school’s current, temporary location is in East Harlem, not West Harlem or Morningside Heights, which are represented by Community Board 9.

Teachers College Community School officials said that 40 percent of the current students are residents of Community Board 9’s area, and that number is expected to rise after the move to Morningside Avenue next fall.

Renovations at 168 Morningside will transform what was previously St. Joseph’s School into a 17-classroom building with the ability to accommodate about 300 students.

The construction process is “taking a functional, solid, historic building ... and making it functional for a 21st century education,” said Nancy Streim, associate vice president for school and community partnerships at Teachers College, who spoke at the CB9 youth, education and libraries committee meeting this Wednesday.

What is still unclear is the number of grades that the school will serve. The current Department of Education application is only for kindergarten through fifth grade, and the school’s principal, Jeanene Worrell-Breeden, said that they will know by the spring whether the city will allow for the addition of pre-K and sixth through eighth grades.

“Right now, it looks good. We have to go through the process, though,” Worrell-Breeden said.
Community board members say that they have been working to advertise the school to local residents, emphasizing its connections with Teachers College.

School staff members said that the first kindergarten class is already benefiting from the smaller school environment and the programs designed and run by Teachers College staff and students. Those programs, centered on nutrition, physical education, art, acting, and technology, have been incorporated into the curriculum and are run after school by TC faculty, graduate assistants, and students.

“Teachers College has stepped in and we are really proud of what we have to offer,” said Streim, adding that the emphasis has been on providing a “new program to address the emotional and social needs of the children.”

Worrell-Breeden said that the involvement of Teachers College has enabled the school to provide programming which wouldn’t have been possible through regular Department of Education funding due to the small size of the student body.

And the school is small: at the moment, the teaching staff consists of two regular classroom teachers and one special education teacher, with administrators, a secretary, a parent coordinator, and a paraprofessional making up the rest of the staff.

“We’re up and running; we have a fabulous staff,” Worrell-Breeden said. “We’re working together to make the kind of school we want.”

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