

Troubled journey for vocational school



Joanne Rathe/Globe Staff

The rough start to the academic year at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School, whose programs include culinary arts, was the latest in a series of setbacks that has roiled the school over several decades.

The plans for the long-stalled Madison Park High School in November 1966 were the grandest ever pitched for a Boston public school, startling city councilors during a presentation that made front-page news the next day.

The campus-style high school in Roxbury — a neighborhood where educational opportunities had long been short-changed — would boast an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a television studio, and possibly a nightclub or coffeehouse for teenagers. There would be seven buildings total, including a venue inspired by the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City and a vocational-education center geared for students and adults alike.

“This high school will be the salvation of the Boston school system,”

city development director Edward J. Logue boldly predicted. “It will give Latin School a run for its money.”

Those lofty aspirations would never come to be.

Instead of delivering salvation to a school system battling racial inequality, Madison Park repeatedly emerged over the ensuing decades as a symbol of educational failure, bureaucratic neglect, and lingering racial tensions.

Even the opening of the complex in 1977 — years behind schedule — brought mounting disappointment. Construction problems forced students to eat cold meals for six weeks. The swimming pool was unusable. A city fiscal crisis threatened plans to build the vocational center.

The growing list of problems was “like a cancer eating at the school,” the head of the parent council told the Boston Herald in 1978. The troubled history of Madison Park offers insight into why Boston has failed generations of its students who desire to learn a trade or technical skills — often to boost themselves out of a life of poverty — and why local employers have to tap out-of-state workers for jobs that otherwise could have gone to residents a few blocks away.

It also raises questions, as Boston faces another urgent crisis to turn around Madison Park, about what it will take for the city to develop a top-notch vocational high school, like those that thrive in almost every corner of the state, or whether it is doomed to repeat the failures of its past.

“Madison Park has tremendous potential if we could ever get it together,” said Michael Contompasis, a former Boston school superintendent, noting that Worcester has transformed its vocational school into a national model. “It’s a question of leadership, it’s a question of political will, and it’s a question of rethinking all the recommendations ever made.”

Some educators and education advocates in the city question whether the problems facing Madison Park are surmountable, and believe Boston should consider starting a new vocational school from scratch.

The decades of disappointment, they say, have bred a deeply rooted culture of distrust and entrenched territorialism within the school and the neighborhood around it.

Overhaul efforts through the years have often stalled or failed as teachers, community activists, and political leaders have clashed over philosophical differences in how to push the school forward, and debates over whether motives were fueled by the interest of students or personal or political agendas.

Looming over these fights is a School Department that state and city leaders have criticized for valuing college preparatory programs over vocational education and for lacking a basic understanding of what it takes to train students for technical careers or the trades.



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF
Carpentry students from Madison Park Technical Vocational High School are helping to build a home at North Avenue in Roxbury.

That has led to ill-fated decisions, such as appointing headmasters without the appropriate expertise, and filling seats at Madison Park

with students who have failing grades, disciplinary problems, and no interest in vocational education.

Yet every time state or city officials propose spinning off Madison Park from the city school system, allowing it to operate as an independent school system like nearly every other vocational school across the state, the School Department balks. Some teachers get nervous they will lose their jobs or protection under the Boston Teachers Union contract, and community activists protest, fearing such a move could prevent fewer Roxbury students from enrolling.

Just this summer, an intervention team, appointed by Interim Superintendent John McDonough and the Boston Teachers Union to craft a set of remedies for Madison Park, recommended closing the school in three years and replacing it with a regional vocational school at another site if a turnaround fails. McDonough rejected the idea.

“It is my belief and intent to focus on success rather than planning for failure,” McDonough said.

But he acknowledged the challenges are immense, including developing a new culture and mindset at the school.

“I think you have a lot of frustration among faculty and particularly the students who say that we keep promising stuff and not delivering,” McDonough said in an interview, vowing the School Department would do better. “We have an opportunity now to deliver. It does require changes, but it can be done.”

Turnaround effort founders

As school opened this fall, the situation at Madison Park could not have been more bleak. The school scrambled to hire nearly 60 teachers and administrators in August, and some positions remain unfilled.

Many students and teachers went about a week without a legitimate class schedule, prompting students to demonstrate.

Headmaster Diane Ross Gary, who took the reins just a year earlier, resigned a few days later, as a growing number of teachers, students,

and parents called for her termination.

The School Department had resisted firing her for months, and several black political leaders and community activists had lobbied Mayor Martin J. Walsh to keep her in the post, saying she deserved more time to prove herself.

In the end, Gary, who had no prior experience as a headmaster, had failed to gain state certification to lead a school in Massachusetts. All of this occurred as Madison Park was supposed to be starting the third year of a turnaround effort that was pushed by then-mayor Thomas M. Menino, who promised in his 2012 State of the City address to transform the school into a critical job training center for students and adults alike.

Each year of the turnaround has been marked by notable missteps. Scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exams this spring dropped in each subject area. In science, for instance, just 3 percent of 10th-graders scored proficient, down from 25 percent who scored proficient or advanced the previous year.

The school's graduation rate of 63.6 percent, while largely improving, still remains more than 20 percentage points below the state average. "We have kids here who can't read," said one teacher who was not authorized to speak to the news media. "We have a huge problem with kids who can't do fractions. To me that's a real crisis."

The poor academic achievement, combined with student behavior problems, severely restricts the school's ability to place students in apprenticeship programs, a key path to employment. Vocational education experts also say Madison Park is not establishing enough placements in small private businesses, which are more apt to hire students after graduation than large corporations or government agencies.

The dismal record has Mitchell Chester, the state commissioner of elementary and secondary education, contemplating whether he should formally declare the school "underperforming," a move that could set the stage for state receivership in three years absent a dramatic turnaround. A decision is expected in the coming weeks.

Roots of the problem

Boston's early problems with vocational education were rooted in racial inequities that prompted federal court intervention. White students typically attended high schools with more modern facilities than those used by black and Latino students at the crumbling Boston Trade High School in Mission Hill.

US District Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. embraced the Madison Park project, calling it the "keystone" of his plans in the 1970s to desegregate the public schools. A team of experts traveled across the country to develop the programming for what would be called the Humphrey Occupational Resource Center, which opened in 1980 at the Madison Park complex.

Initially, the Humphrey Center taught students for a half-day from all the high schools across the city who wanted to learn a trade, and it operated separately from Madison Park High School, which at the time had a strong focus on music. States across the nation had successfully used half-day programs, but in Boston the arrangement would be short-lived.



Joanne Rathe/Globe Staff

Al Holland (left) was named acting headmaster at Madison Park this fall after a growing number of teachers, students,

and parents called for the firing of Diane Ross Gary.

Confronted with declining enrollment at both the Humphrey Center and Madison Park, the School Committee voted in 1986 to merge the two amid budget-cutting. It also decided to give away a chunk of the complex, including the science building and later the music center, to a new exam school, now called the O'Bryant School of Math and Science.

The merger did not go well. Within a few years, state education officials placed several vocational programs on probation.

“It was a travesty of epic proportions,” said Judith Baker, who taught English at Madison Park from 1979 to 2005 and is now a member of the Friends of Madison Park. “The parents were right to be angry. Madison Park began to deteriorate as a technical school. The superintendent of schools didn’t believe in vocational education at all. We didn’t have any defenders.”

Resistance to severance

To this day, the repercussions of the merger resonate, contributing to an identity crisis that has lasted to this day over whether Madison Park is truly a citywide vocational high school or a neighborhood high school for Roxbury that happens to have vocational programs as electives, said Charles Lyons, the superintendent-director of Shawsheen Valley Technical High School in Billerica and a member of the Madison Park intervention team.

He said the key to Madison Park’s future success is to sever it from the school system and have an independent board of experts run it. “The kids are worthy of a high-quality first-class technical education,” Lyons said. “Boston has the financial capability to provide it. The adults have to make it happen.”

State education officials first raised the idea of independent oversight in the late 1980s, believing it was the only way to ensure Madison Park would get the appropriate attention. But the School Department resisted.

Then-mayor Raymond Flynn, concerned that Boston was failing to

prepare enough students for jobs on the Big Dig and other major projects, called for Madison Park to become an independent vocational school in his 1992 State of the City address.

But the proposal sparked bitter protests from students, community activists, and disaffected faculty, who repeatedly spread false rumors that Flynn wanted to give away seats to suburbanites.

Trying to move forward

A year later, students descended on City Hall to protest. Menino, who was preparing to become acting mayor because Flynn was departing to become ambassador to the Vatican, met with a few of the students. After they emerged from the meeting, other protesters pelted Menino with snowballs, even though he remained undecided about the proposal.

The issue ultimately proved too toxic during a mayoral election year and it died.

Madison Park slipped from the headlines, and with a skilled headmaster at the helm for a few years, the school enjoyed an academic reemergence. But that, too, would be short-lived, undermined by a succession of headmasters and then a laser-like focus on improving MCAS scores, sacrificing time in vocational education classes for test prep.

Menino would not enter the fray of turning around Madison Park again until his 2012 speech, setting off a new round of acrimony. On the morning students protested last month — demanding their class schedules immediately — a handful of carpentry students, who had already been assigned some courses, were on the other side of Roxbury, pouring cement for the foundation of a single-family house they are helping to build.

Madison Park teachers, administrators and supporters point to the activity on the job site that morning as evidence that good things are happening there.

“The staff has worked very hard to make sure the school is moving forward and are trying to make sure the education is current and

relevant and prepares them for the future,” said Al Holland, the school’s acting headmaster.

On a tour of the 900-student school one recent morning, the chaos of last month appeared to have subsided. Nicely painted hallways were quiet.

Freshmen in one math class listened carefully to a lesson on solving algebraic equations; students in the electrical shop diligently wired light switches; and students donned chef caps as they sliced peaches for a cobbler.

Teachers talked enthusiastically about their programs and grooming students for the workforce or college. Vincent Fanuele, a carpentry teacher, said one of his most important tasks is “to develop their character and their professional skills.”

A group of seniors studying automotives said the school has helped them see the merits of going to college. Some talked of becoming engineers; others to get more advanced credentials to be mechanics. “This school has opened my eyes to so many things I never knew before,” said Jeffrey Ruiz, 17, of Dorchester.

But Holland, who came out of retirement to help out the school temporarily, acknowledged that much work remains for the school to be what everyone dreams it could be.

“The biggest challenge is to make sure we are working with one vision and one purpose,” he said, “and moving forward with excellence in everything we do.”

More coverage:

[Timeline of Madison Park High School](#)

James Vaznis can be reached at jvaznis@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@globevaznis](#).