When crews started hauling furniture and items out of Eastern Senior High School in July to clear the building and prep it for a year-long top-to-bottom remodeling, they could have expected to find some old artifacts in the 1923-built structure. What they found in a library storage room, however, predates the building by several decades.

The loot ended up being about 10 moving boxes’ worth of items ranging from records to “The Easterner” magazine and scrapbooks filled with commencement ceremony and theater programs.

“History of School,” a homemade book by Virginia Grohs, documents the 1923-1924 school year – the first year in Eastern’s current building. Before that, Eastern High School operated at Eighth Street SE and Pennsylvania Avenue SE, where the vacant Hine Junior High building sits today.

Grohs’ short book details the changes in store for life at a brand new school. One of the major changes was a rapidly increasing student population – from 1,166 in 1922 to 1,409 just one year later. Last year, the school’s enrollment was under 500 students.

All the materials discovered in the library storage room were later turned over to the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives, which serves as a historian for the District public school system.

Emptying Out the Building

In addition to finding long-forgotten historical documents, crews worked long hours to get the school ready for the first step in the remodeling process: covering the structure and spending six weeks clearing out all the hazardous materials it contains. When that work is finished, probably in October, the new work will officially start, and the rebuilding process will begin to take shape.

Although the school building will be out of commission for the next year, school activities will need to continue during that time. To that end, some parts of a temporary trailer complex were readied in July.

Four trailers – for the school administration, support staff, library and Unity Health – were set up on the tennis court west of Eastern. A “student-learning complex” of additional trailers and covered walkways connecting them will be completed nearby this month.

Jonathan Weinstein, vice president for facilities and capital development for Unity Health, said his company’s role at Eastern is their only work inside a DC public school. Weinstein got a chance to tour the trailer his company will occupy for the next year as it was being set up.

“I think our staff is going to like it,” he said.
The Deciders Do Their Jobs

As new construction on the school nears, the amount of time left to choose Eastern’s physical and academic look is winding down. DC school officials have started to finalize those choices, most notably by formally committing to two academies when Eastern re-opens in the fall of 2010.

The long-running health academy program will be retained, and a freshman academy will be launched. More academies are likely to be chosen later.

A July school improvement team meeting reflected the commitment to an academy structure of small groups within a larger school. Although a spokesman of the Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization (OPEFM), the agency in charge of the school renovation, said that the plans are subject to change, many of the plans shown at that meeting are likely to be retained in the final building outcome.

Blueprints showed by the reconstruction project architect had an academy situated on the third floor, with science classroom space at the building’s “knuckles,” or front corners, and standard classes running along the rest of the school’s perimeter. There also was a space reserved for an administration office, which would house the employees directly in charge of that third floor academy, and the large open area in the front middle of the school was left open for activities in August.

Davidson said the goal is to create a scholarship program for Eastern students and to establish a mentoring network of alumni and current students.

“It’s our way of giving back to Eastern and the students,” she said.

Information regarding the class of 1989’s fundraising efforts will be available at www.easternhighalumni.com later this summer.

As Eastern moves through a period of great transition, Davidson said mentoring will be even more important than usual. She also said that student views should be kept in mind as their school is rebuilt and the academic programs changed.

“I think oftentimes we forget we’re not dealing with 6-year-olds. We’re dealing with 16-year-olds,” she said.

Davidson has been following the changes at her high school and was generally pleased with the direction the school seems to be headed. She did have one request regarding the health academy, of which she was a student.

“I would like to see it brought back to the level it was when I was there,” she said. Davidson pursued a career in public health after graduation.

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A wireless Internet signal would be available in each courtyard, thanks to the proposed media center on the school’s first floor, right next to the auditorium entrance. The media center, in the front middle of the school, would basically flow into the rest of the school by having a “cyber café” in the hallway to serve as a buffer.

Another unfunded design goal was to open up the auditorium by placing windows along the walls and a railing by the windows. Regardless of whether that happens, the dark blue paint now covering the walls will be removed.

While springing for the extras in a project that already is slated to cost nearly $60 million may seem difficult, the huge space of the school could help it pay for itself. The 288,000-square-foot school has a lot of space, much more than will be needed to house the goal enrollment of 1,100 students. The blueprints featured an open cluster on the ground floor that could be used as space for a “programming partner” such as a nonprofit.

An attendee of July’s school improvement team meeting suggested using that space for some of DC’s dance studios, many of which are unable to currently afford their own space. Those dance studios could also make use of Eastern’s large auditorium, they suggested.

Taking Care of Those Who Came After Her

Eastern has a reputation for having dedicated alumni, and 1989 Eastern graduate Donna Davidson is living up to that standard. Davidson and other members of her class organized a basketball fundraiser in July, and events such as a cabaret are planned around the 20-year reunion of whether that happens, the dark blue paint now covering the walls will be removed.

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