

Education Lab
The Seattle Times

How Seattle's Lincoln High School came back to life after nearly 40 years of closure

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📷 1 of 9 | Students and their families explore the newly renovated Lincoln High School in August. (Rebekah Welch / The Seattle Times)



By **Dahlia Bazzaz** 

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After months of tearfully protesting the Seattle School Board's decision to close Lincoln High School in 1981, alumni, students and staff poured

their grief into a broadsheet newspaper for students.

“It all seems so unreal, like a bad dream, to watch teachers you know and love reading the school district requirements for retirement, and going to a first-period wake,” read an unsigned editorial. “But Lincoln is not dead,” it continued, metaphorically.

Now, alumni — who have rich memories of spirit week and reciting the Gettysburg Address in front of a bronze bust of Lincoln’s namesake — are overjoyed that the author’s sentiments were literally correct. Last month, the district opened the long-anticipated Wallingford school to 591 freshmen and sophomores after nearly 40 years of closure, reestablishing Lincoln as Seattle’s oldest operating high school.

But in more ways than not, the Lincoln that opened its doors this fall is a different school, a product of its time, renovated for close to \$100 million and expanded to the size of roughly five Costcos to eventually accommodate 1,600 students from parts of the Queen Anne, University District, Fremont, Wallingford and Green Lake neighborhoods.

Today’s Lincoln is a technological testing ground for Seattle Public Schools, which gave each student a laptop and purchased several 3D printers. There is an entire room outfitted with exercise bikes, a “genius” bar for charging devices and a futuristic courtyard.

The school, which once had the most English learners of any high school in the district, caters to a wealthier and less racially diverse group of families and students than it did when it closed. Now, just 6% of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, compared to 42% 38 years ago.

Lincoln’s demographic changes resulted from a generation’s worth of school-boundary changes, gradual phaseout of the district’s desegregation tools and an explosion of wealth in the area.

Other options

The idea for opening a new high school came up about a decade ago, when the district and community members voiced concern about crowding at Roosevelt, Ballard and Garfield high schools. Enrollment had grown in response to the Great Recession, and more growth was expected. Officials turned to Lincoln because the building was already there. But it wasn't the only solution School Board members considered to address the squeeze.

"At the same time we were talking about the need for Lincoln, we were talking about empty seats at Rainier Beach and Cleveland," said Stephan Blanford, a School Board member from 2013 to 2017. "In a perfect world, we would have shifted boundaries that would've allowed us to redistribute students into those schools ... but politically and logistically, that wasn't very feasible."

It was something board members considered privately, said Michael DeBell, who served on the board from 2005 to 2013. But there was concern that families might take their kids out of public schools if they exercised that option.

Capacity is still an issue in North End schools, said Liza Rankin, a parent advocate running for a school-board seat in the district's northernmost region. But she conceded the opening comes at an awkward time. The district's five-year plan promises to prioritize students "farthest away from educational justice," especially African American male students. And although a [long sought-after rebuild](#) of Rainier Beach High School is scheduled, many other schools still feel the district's [long backlog of maintenance work](#).

"It certainly doesn't help (that timing) to have a school open up in the whitest, wealthiest part of town," she said. At the beginning of the 1980-81 school year, just a little more than half of students identified as white. Now, nearly 70% of students do — and that's after the current School Board stepped in to make Lincoln a dual-language-immersion pathway school in the hopes of adding more students of color.

Making a new culture

Part of new principal Ruth Medsker's vision for the school, which she's developed for the past two years, embraces a model of instruction called project-based learning. Generally, that means students are expected to pick up knowledge by trying to answer a question or develop a solution to a real problem. For example, history teacher Dan Noyes said he planned to ask his students to dream up a product that pushes the world in a positive direction as they study social movements.

“This is a next-generation high school,” said Medsker. “Many students come into high school disengaged. We’re trying to connect them to real-world problems.”

It’s unclear how this looks day-to-day. The school denied multiple requests for a Times reporter to observe the teachers in action.

At its best, a high school also provides a community that helps students find their place in the world. The challenge of a new school is building that environment from scratch. For help, the school administration asked incoming sophomores to help form Lincoln’s new student government.

Those students spent many summer hours thinking about ways to make the school more welcoming than the places they spent their freshman year. To make Lincoln feel less empty, they hung posters for students to sign up for and create new clubs. They also hung hundreds of little paper cutouts with each student’s name written on it, and signed off on the “Harry Potter” model for spirit competitions: To promote social inclusion, competition for school-spirit awards are not between graduating classes, but Hogwarts-style “houses” that encompass all-age homeroom classes.

The school’s small environment helped cultivate a more friendly, less cliquey culture so far, said Hazel Stanfield, a sophomore and student-government member.

“Other high schools have established traditions already — and there’s no expectation of that at Lincoln,” she said.

Freshman Stuti Adhikary, who initially struggled to find a friend group at McClure Middle School after moving to Seattle from India, felt the difference immediately.

“On the first day, people were already asking me if I wanted to sit at their table at lunch,” said Adhikary. “That never happened at McClure.” She said she also feels more warmth from the teaching staff.

Still, at about a third of its stated capacity now, several students told The Seattle Times they’ve found themselves completely alone as they walk through some Lincoln hallways. Parents and Seattle School Board member Rick Burke pushed for a younger and smaller starting population to minimize disruption to upperclassmen who live in the school’s new attendance area but attend other high schools.

While the students and the devices they use to learn may have changed at Lincoln, some things haven’t.

Though bronze Abe is now behind a glass display case, school spirit is still strong. Already, parents and students are showing up en masse to sporting events. Off-campus lunch is still going strong, with students spilling out of the old brick building to buy things from QFC or fast-food joints. It's just, well, way more expensive now.

Over the past month, more than 100 people wrote to Education Lab with their memories of Lincoln High School. Look for a story sharing the highlights soon.

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