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Rocky Hill School ahead of the curve

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Sometimes the caliber of a school building is so high that the students and teachers who use it have no choice but to be far ahead of the curve. And when the building is at the Rocky Hill School, it is destined to be an ineffaceable instrument of unique education.

This Fall, the new Upper School opened at Rocky Hill. The building has about 13 classrooms, accommodating 142 students in grades nine through twelve. It's two stories sit in the north east corner of Rocky Hill's 85 acres, with a good view of the Narragansett Bay and one of its estuaries, the Green River.

"It's allowing for new ways for kids to receive information," said Physics Teacher Scott Young. "Each kid learns in a different way and the more options the better chance of reaching the student."

There are two key ways the new building facilitates this kind of learning; technology and structure.

Every student in the Upper School has a Tablet PC. They look like laptops but are more advanced in that the monitor can be reversed and used as a writing canvas, like a piece of paper that remembers what was written on it. "It's an integral part of the work product," said Young. "Each student has their own web page and can access everything they need from it."

Aside from personal equipment, the structure itself is an old New England building with high tech secrets and functions like a mixture of past and future. There is a small college prep classroom set up like an auditorium with speakers lining the ceiling and a camera in the front for web conferencing. "When students go on to college, they'll be in classes like this," said Public Relations Coordinator K.D. Brown. "This way they have some preparation."

The first thing a person notices after walking into the building is the design on the floor. Blue symmetrical shapes flow out from the hidden center of the entrance room. The shapes lead the person into the building, then lead their eyes to the Nautilus in the middle. "It's one of the earliest complex organisms that abides by perfect symmetry," said Brown. "There are many marine and environmental metaphors. There is something about the complex formation of that shell...the way it expands, almost web-like is a mirror for the connectedness of our students and faculty."

The complexity of the Nautilus also mirrors the intricacy of the building itself. For example, on any day that is not overcast, the building needs no artificial lights. It is designed to be self-sustaining with natural light. And the way the sun bounces off the yellow walls creates an airy, calming environment that sits in stark contrast to the usual solid, imposing walls of a high school.

All the classrooms have at least one wall made of mostly windows. "This way you're always immersed in this educational environment," said Young.

Inside those windows, the students are not lined up in the traditional row formation of a classroom. With an average of 13 students per class, the students sit at a small circular table, surrounding their teacher. The students cannot get lost in the crowd, they cannot go to the back of the room and zone out, the set up only allows for students to be involved with the lesson and the teacher. "The kids are not in a hierarchy of rows," said Young. "The teachers say in the middle of the table with the kids all around. It's easy to just give students a lecture, but to facilitate a learning experience is a more complicated approach but it's more successful in the long run...No kids are left behind here. "

Even Rocky Hill School's administrative assistant, Pat McNally, said the classroom structure is exceptional. "Teachers have mentioned to me the use of the table and how there is much more class participation," she said. "Everything has increased in a positive way."

Young and Brown said the new building encourages an atmosphere the school has promoted all along.

"There's something to it that makes students so self confident," said Brown. "They grow up in an atmosphere where they can be themselves... We have all different types of kids here, it's like the movie *The Breakfast Club*, by the end of it they are all friends."

Brown added, "You don't get cliques and segments. The culture doesn't allow it...They've seen the teen movies and they know the stereotypes so they know they exist, but it doesn't exist here."

The \$5.2 million new building is the first facilities improvement of the Rocky Hill School's 20-year master plan, which is a \$22 million endeavor. The first phase also includes curriculum innovations, raising faculty salaries and renovations to existing buildings. Over the next six to eight years, they will also build a new performing arts center, a new field and renovate the dining hall and library.

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