



OPENING DAY

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The summer was a blast, but Alison Seltzer can't wait for school to start tomorrow.

Like most of her Long Island grade-school peers, many of whom return to classrooms today, the fourth-grader is looking forward to showing off her new outfit and swapping summer vacation stories with her pals. More than anything, though, Alison, 9, is hyped up about the year ahead in a newly renovated building.

To help deal with mounting enrollment in the Port Washington School District, Salem Elementary has been returned to its former glory, bringing the number of elementary buildings in the district to five. "It's beautiful," Alison said of her freshly painted, computerized building with all new furniture. "I'm very excited."

The excitement expressed by the youngster from Flower Hill is rippling all across Long Island - from the Roosevelt school district in western Nassau, to Sachem and Smithtown in mid-Island and the Hamptons in easternmost Suffolk. Driven by a confluence of trends, previously mothballed buildings are being reopened, new ones are being christened, and the days are being counted until the completion of others under construction.

At the center of it all are the kids of the "baby boomlet" entering their high school years. The sprawling Sachem district, home of the Island's biggest high school, which once housed 5,000 students, has been split into two buildings at opposite ends of the district. Eastport-South Manor opened its new high school last fall. And Smithtown, in addition to major reconfiguration, is working on plans to open a second high school next year.

Climbing enrollment, coupled with schools taking advantage of construction aid incentives being offered by the state, has combined to increase school construction activity, said Jim Kaden, vice president of the Nassau-Suffolk School Board Association. "Enough bonds have been authorized to keep the momentum of new construction and renovations going well into the future."

Meanwhile, as the Island diversifies, culturally, religiously and ethnically, more and more families - disenchanted with public schools or preferring a specialized education for their youngsters - are turning to parochial schools and charter schools, adding to the steady demand for more classrooms there as well.

Steadily increasing enrollment in Port Washington, mostly in the middle and high school, led the district to reopen South Salem, which the district stopped using for classrooms during an enrollment slump in the mid-1980s, said Superintendent Geoffrey Gordon.

The passage of a \$68 million bond in 2001 allowed the district to return the two-story structure to an elementary school with 20 classrooms for grades K-5.

When school resumes tomorrow, Gordon said, 4,972 students will occupy classrooms in the district's seven buildings, about a 16 percent increase from the 1999-2000 school year. "This is a wonderful time for our community," he said. "We feel confident we've handled the growth while being able to continue providing educational excellence."

To stay atop their enrollment growth, Smithtown has been learning how to juggle.

When school begins today, some 850 students from the east side of town will resume classwork at the newly

renovated Nesaquake Middle School on Edgewood Avenue. The \$6 million renovation includes improvements to the art and technology classrooms and a music suite.

Nesaquake had been leased to the Board of Cooperative Educational Services for the past 12 years, said Robert Clark, assistant superintendent for finance and operations.

During that time, middle-school students attended what had been the district's second high school, Smithtown High School East, which had been converted into Smithtown Middle. In 1999, the district took over an old police academy building and converted it into Great Hollow Middle, to deal with continued enrollment growth. In a \$16 million makeover, Great Hollow Middle was outfitted with new classrooms as well as music and technology facilities. A \$139 million bond approved in June 2000 paid for both middle school projects. A total of five other projects, three middle schools and two high schools, are planned, Clark said.

Expanding parochial schools

The demand for more space, albeit for different reasons, is just as intense in the parochial and private sectors as in the public schools.

The North Shore Hebrew Academy High School, for instance, is not scheduled to occupy its \$25 million campus on Community Drive in Lake Success until 2006, but the community is buzzing with anticipation. "It's an extension of home," said Great Neck's Jamie Katz, whose son, Brian, 14, is a freshman, and daughter, Ray, 16, is a junior at the 3-year-old North Shore Hebrew Academy now on Community Drive, near the new campus being built.

Previously, there was no modern, Orthodox co-ed high school on the North Shore of Long Island, said Headmaster Daniel J. Vitow, requiring students from the area to travel as far as New Jersey and Westchester County. The new campus, on nearly 12 acres, will have a synagogue designed like an amphitheater, four state-of-the-art science labs, a two-story library, and 30 classrooms in addition to a gymnasium with an indoor track, a pool, and music and art studios.

Vitow, formerly the principal of the Hebrew Academy of Five Towns and Rockaway in Lawrence, said the school caters to Jews of all backgrounds, not just those of the Orthodox community. "Here, students get a great secular education combined with a great Judaic education that works," he said.

An inclusive philosophy of a secular education combined with Judaic studies is also the focus of the Jewish Academy of Suffolk County and the Early Childhood Discovery Center preschool, a private day school that recently opened in East Northport.

For more than 30 years, The Hebrew Academy in Suffolk County provided grade school education under Orthodox Jewish supervision. It closed three years ago due to managerial difficulties, said administrators at the new academy.

Now, the new academy, in a 48,000-square-foot old public school building on Cedar Road that can hold up to 300 children, is starting out with a modest enrollment of 30 preschoolers and second-graders who will be supervised by eight teachers and five administrative staff, said Rabbi Tuvia Telden, a co-founder of the school and director of Long Island's 25 Chabad centers. Telden said he hopes to add classes up to eighth grade as the school builds a reputation in the area.

The idea of having Jewish children learn regular curriculum along with a community of their peers, Telden said, seems to be "something that parents are more and more beginning to appreciate."

Dave Gordon, a technology teacher from Commack, is among them. "It's important that we keep strong the ties

to our past," said Gordon, whose son, Steven, is to start preschool at the Academy tomorrow.

A place of their own

After three years of learning in rented space at East Hampton Indoor Tennis, Theresa Dargis' daughter, Andi, 8, and son, Frankie, 7, will finally have a brand-new school building of their very own on 10 acres in Wainscott. Her children are especially excited to return to the nonprofit Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School for third grade this fall, said Dargis, of East Hampton.

"My kids know that this is a big deal, that this is a special school that was built just for them and their friends," Dargis said. "It's truly going to be their building," she said of the facility, which will kick off the new school year Monday.

Aside from ownership and improved facilities, the space also gives the small charter school, which specializes in integrating special education children with regular-education peers, a place to grow. It also saves the school \$110,000 yearly in rent.

The Town of East Hampton offered the Wainscott property to the school in 1996 for a "lease" of a dollar a year for 50 years, but the founder and executive director, Dawn Zimmerman Hummel, said it took extra time to raise enough money for just part of the \$2.2 million building construction. "It took a monumental community force to make this school happen," said Zimmerman Hummel, of Amagansett.

Zimmerman Hummel, who has a 15-year-old autistic son, said she opened the two-story, 20,000-square-foot school to give parents more educational options. Many parents, she said, are discovering that charter schools like the Hamptons center, which provide more individual attention and tailored learning plans, have helped their kids grow mentally and socially.

"Every school out here is wonderful," she said, "but I think one size doesn't fit all."