

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES EVALUATION

THE RALPH STREET SCHOOL

27 RYE STREET, PROVIDENCE



PREPARED FOR

Providence Redevelopment Agency
444 Westminster Street, Suite 3A
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

BY

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Property location/setting:

The Ralph Street School occupies a .5-acre lot (Plat 108, Lot 161) at 22 Rye Street in the Silver Lake section of Providence. The original address for the school was 71 Ralph Street. The setting is predominantly residential with nearby commercial uses along Plainfield Street.

Date of construction:

The school was built by the City of Providence in 1902 and opened in the fall of 1903. This building replaced an earlier frame school built by the Town of Johnston ca. 1860. With the annexation of this part of Johnston (including Olneyville) into Providence in 1898, the City set about to assess and modernize the schools it had acquired.

National Register criteria met:

The Ralph Street School is significant under National Register **Criterion A** on the local level for its association with the rise of Providence as a population center and prosperous industrial city in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It also is eligible under National Register **Criterion C** as a fine example of the architect-designed, Colonial Revival public schools built by the City of Providence in the late 19th- and early 20th centuries. This school represents an important transition from the common frame schoolhouse of the mid- to late-19th century to the “modern schools” common by the 1920s. In this transition, schools were typically two-story, built of brick, with central corridors, indoor plumbing, ample fenestration and central heating. The Ralph Street School was designed by the firm of Angell and Swift (Hartwell, Williams and Kingston, general contractors). It is one of approximately 12 surviving city-built brick schoolhouses of comparable scale built between 1895 and 1924 (see Table 1).

Description:

See Figures 1-3

Exterior. This is a brick, two-story, flat-roofed building measuring 100’ by 75’ overall. There are four classrooms on each floor. The building comprises a main block measuring 61’ by 100’ with a central 73’-wide pavilion extending 13’ out from the south wall. The two main entrances occur at the joint of this pavilion and the main block. Most of the area outside the building footprint is now paved, including areas to the immediate east and west of the school likely used as playgrounds as built in 1902.

The school rests on a foundation combining elements of quarry-faced granite and concrete and a raised brick basement the height of which is marked by a chamfered granite. Walls above this basement are predominantly brick with a brownstone beltcourse incorporated into the first-floor window sills and extending the full perimeter of the building. Brownstone lintels on the second floor extend only above the window openings. On the second floor, all lintels are brick flat-arch except for the few round-arch openings described below.

The main entrance doors are set below round-arch openings with ornate brick corbeling. The paired doors set in these openings are modern metal replacements surmounted by a single, round-arch light, which also appears to be a relatively recent alteration. The doorway arches are echoed at the second floor in two round-arch window openings with this brickwork more

restrained around the arch than that of the main entrances. All other window openings are rectangular with windows paired or grouped in threes. These windows are modern replacements. Available historical images are of poor definition and, as a result the exact pane configuration is indeterminate (see Figure 6). These views indicate that rectangular windows were double hung with a fixed transom. Current windows are metal and double-hung with a solid panel inserted in what was likely the upper transom. Several of these have been adapted to accept modern, single-room air conditioners.

Interior. The ground and second floors comprise a central 14' corridor flanked by two classrooms on either side. Office and auxiliary spaces are centrally located on the north wall of the corridor between the two flanking classrooms. Classrooms measure 28' by 33' with 14' ceilings. In each classroom there are five windows along the 33' wall (see widow description in exterior section). Each classroom provides two doors opening to the central corridor. These 5-panel doorways also have a fixed transom (now filled). Double doors at the end of the corridor open to landings and stairways. Although all classrooms and corridors are now surfaced with linoleum tile, original hardwood flooring is visible in the location of former second floor lockers (now removed). Original varnished beadboard paneling is now painted (there are areas revealing original finish). Classrooms feature simple molded surrounds for doors, windows, closets, shelving, cubbies and blackboards. Original slate blackboards have been resurfaced with caulk material or paint.

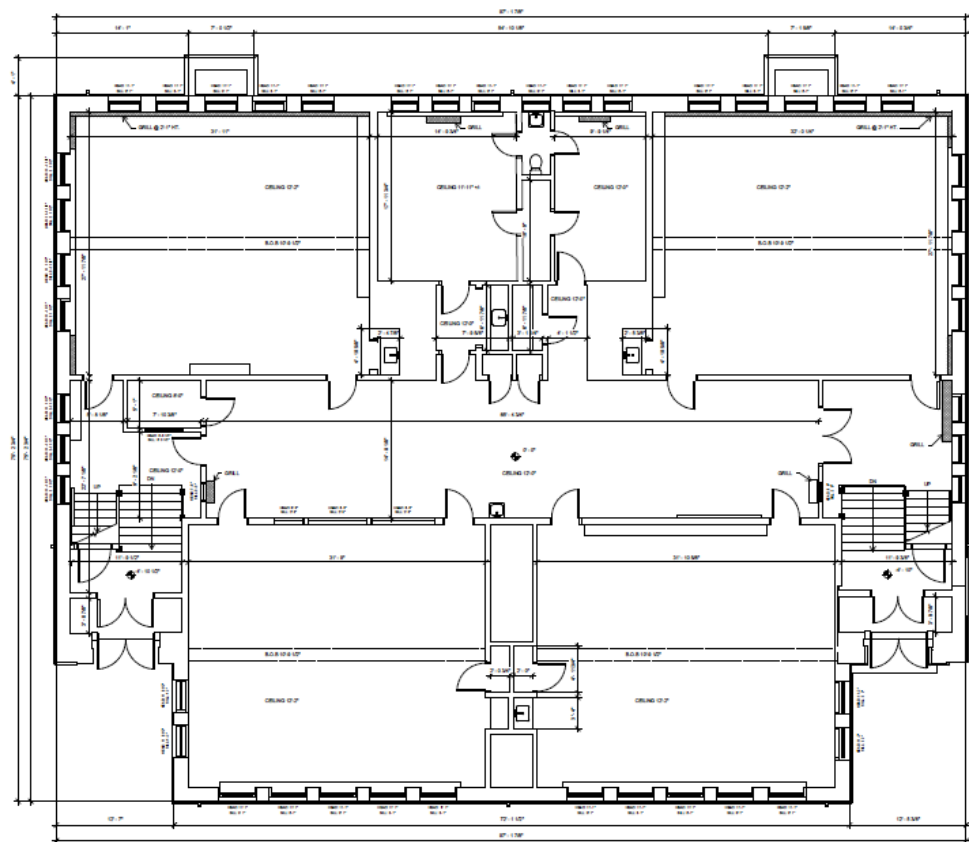


Figure 1
Existing First Floor Plan

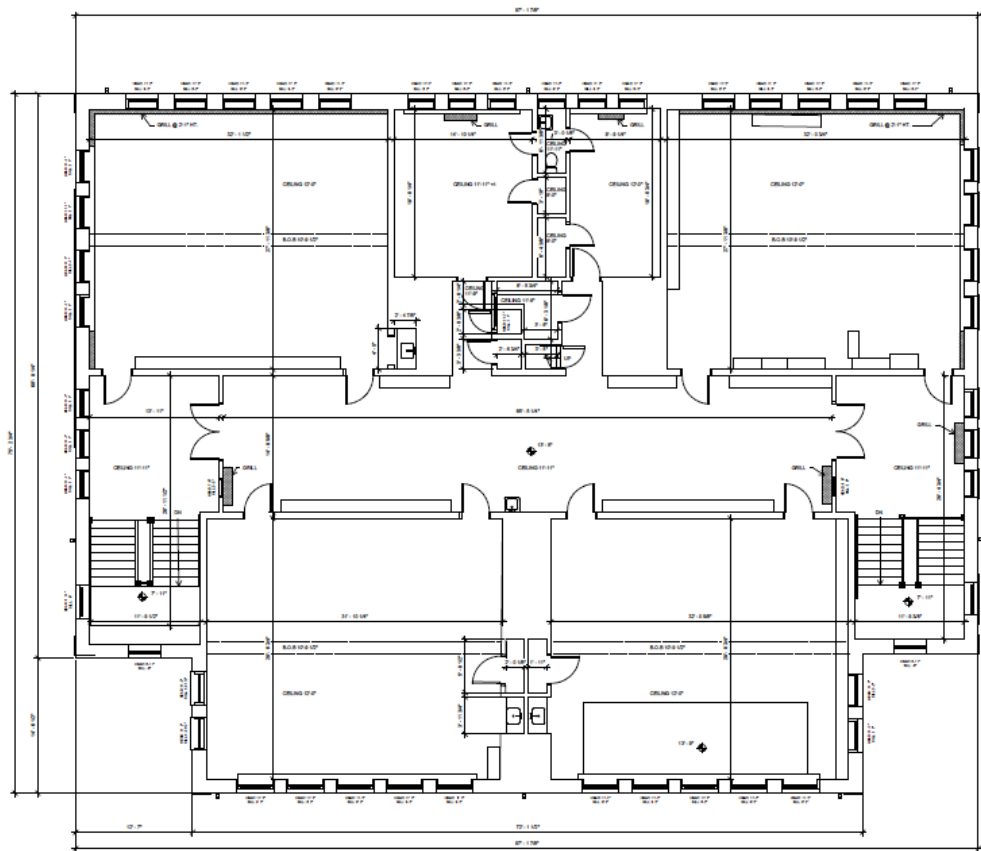


Figure 2
Existing Second Floor Plan



Figure 3
Existing Basement Plan

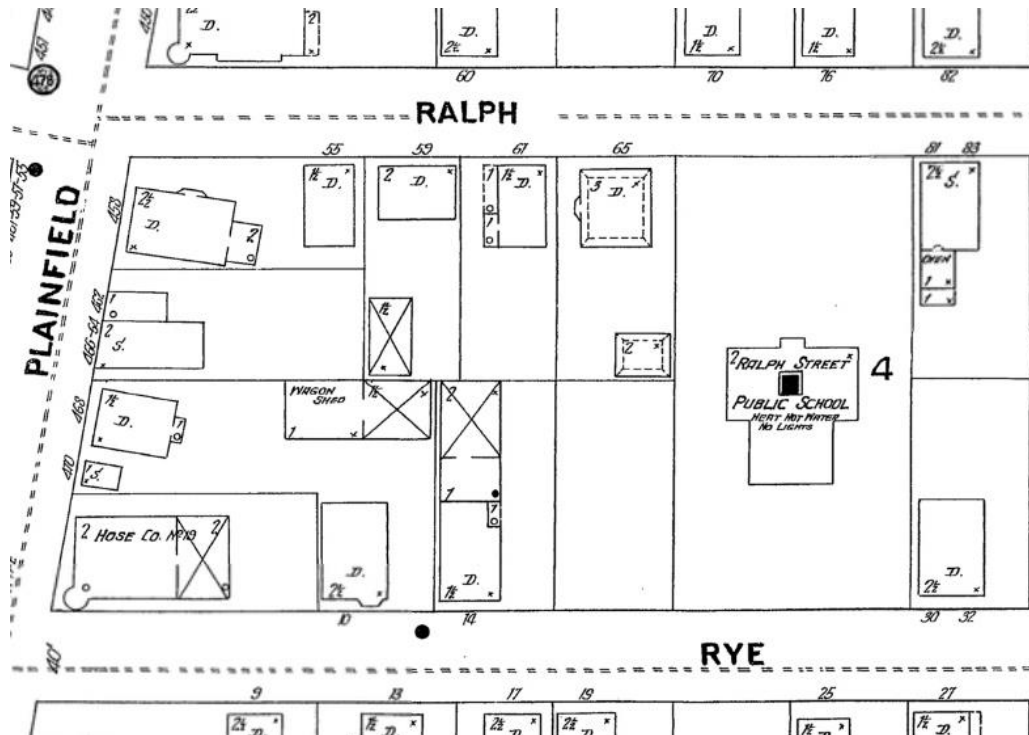


Figure 4

Detail from 1900 Sanborn Map showing first (frame) Ralph Street School as acquired by City of Providence in the 1898 annexation of part of Johnston

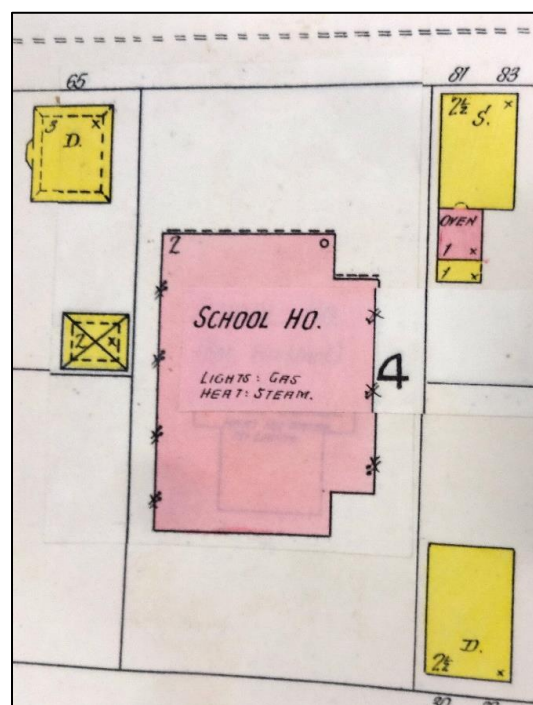


Figure 5

Detail from 1904 Sanborn Map showing new schoolhouse pasted over earlier image as shown in Figure 5

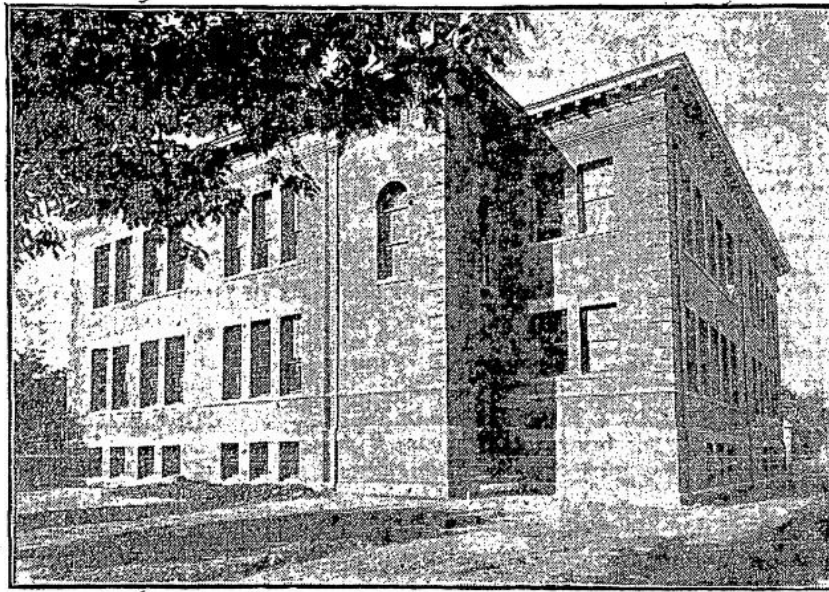


Figure 6
Halftone of Ralph Street School as built
Taken from microfilm (*Providence Journal*, August 13, 1902)
View northeast

History of the Ralph Street School

With the annexation of parts of Johnston in 1898, the City of Providence acquired a number of local district primary schoolhouses. At the time of annexation Providence had 64 primary schools, a number that rose to 72 as a result of the annexation. Among these district schoolhouses was the Rose Street¹ School, erected ca 1860 by the Town of Johnston (Figure 5), a two-story, frame building. City records indicate that Johnston had made some late-century improvements to the original, Civil War-era school, including an internal heating plant. The City undertook some rehabilitation of the school in 1899 and 1900 including replastering, new flooring, revarnishing of woodwork, and a lowering and repair of blackboards. Along with this cosmetic work, the City installed a new boiler along with a general rearrangement of piping and new radiator placement.²

Despite these improvements, in early 1901 the City chose to replace the renamed Ralph Street Elementary School. At first the City hoped to sell the building at a public auction to be held July 6, 1901, an option strongly pressed by one of the City Councilors.³ When the auction produced no bidder for relocating the building, a contract for demolition and construction of the present school was awarded July 10, 1901. The old school was demolished in December 1901. The design contract was awarded to Angell & Swift, architects, for \$40,000 (Hartwell, Williams and

¹ The City of Providence changed the name of this street to Ralph Street by 1900.

² Source: *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Buildings* (1901).

³ "Public Auction to be Held." *Providence Journal* (6 July 1901).

Kingston, general contractors).⁴ The school was substantially complete by the summer of 1902. A tour organized by the Commission on City Property in August found the school to be "...among the most modern and best equipped of any building owned by the city."⁵ The present school was officially opened in September 1903.

The Ralph Street School remained in service as a city primary school until the early 1980s. In 1985 it housed Providence Head Start, a federal antipoverty program. After the closing of Head Start at this location, other non-profit organizations occupied the building until recent years. The building, currently vacant, is owned by the Providence Redevelopment Agency and is currently under consideration for adaptive reuse.

Significance:

An early "Modern School."

As noted above, the Ralph Street School is significant under national Register **Criterion C** for its exemplification of an important transitional period in schoolhouse architecture, occupying a place between the frame public schools of the 19th century (of one or two stories) and the fully-formed, brick "modern schools" that were common by the 1920s.

Although there are some examples of masonry school buildings, public schoolhouses of the mid-to late-19th century were typically of frame construction and heated by a coal stove in each room. There were few provisions for sanitation beyond outhouses located behind the school and hand-pumped wells for furnishing water. A growing understanding of the relationship between effective education and well-designed, healthful schools brought about incremental change in the last quarter of the 19th century and major improvements in the early 20th.

It is also significant under **Criterion A** for its representation of the rising prosperity of Providence attendant to post-Civil War industrial expansion and its associated population growth. These factors provided conditions for an examination of the role of public education in rapidly-changing communities as well as a rethinking of school architecture. Significant in this rethinking was an understanding that schools served a vital role in the "Americanization" of the children of new ethnic populations settling in various city neighborhoods. As noted by Joanna Doherty of RIHPHC, "the Colonial Revival design...with its characteristic symmetrical proportions, flat roof, and rectangular, horizontal massing evoked orderliness, discipline, and learning."⁶ Modern school design also incorporated important advances in building technology which, by the early 20th century, had inevitable application in school construction. These advancements included wide availability of brick as a principal—and fireproof—construction material, ample natural lighting and ventilation by way of operable windows, central heating, indoor plumbing, and, by the 'teens, electric lighting and sanitary surfaces. Typical of schoolhouses of the period, Angell & Swift departed from the use of coal stoves located in each classroom and placed a central heating plant in the raised basement.

⁴ The Chalkstone Ave School was also designed by Angell and Swift in the same year.

⁵ "New Primary School Houses Well-Appointed Buildings." *Providence Journal* 16 August 1902): 10.

⁶ Correspondence: RIHPHC to Torrado Architects re: North Providence schoolhouses, April 5, 2016.

The transitional character of the Ralph Street School is demonstrated by its use of plank flooring and beadboard paneling as opposed to the widespread use of ceramic tile as sanitary surfaces, especially in corridors by the 1920s.⁷

This transition is also demonstrated by the common use of gas lighting as opposed to the general electrification of schoolhouses that was occurring by 1920. Shortly before the construction of the Ralph Street School, the Mayor of Providence opposed public school electrification in his 1901 address:

I trust that in all new buildings economy will be exercised, and that simplicity which should always be a feature of public school building, be adhered to. I cannot think it is necessary that our schoolhouses be lighted by electricity.⁸

The Mayor's position made sense. Electrification of a public school in 1901 would have been extraordinary considering the nascent period of the Rhode Island electrical grid and the establishment less than a decade earlier of alternating current as the dominant form of urban electrification. It is likely that electrification at this school took place in the 1920s with the installation of "schoolhouse style" hanging incandescent lamps. The current fluorescent lighting fixtures appear to date to the 1960s or '70s.⁹

Construction of the Ralph Street School was substantially complete by August of 1902. A tour of the new facility by members of the Committee on City Property found the schoolhouse to be "among the most modern and best-equipped of any building owned by the City."¹⁰ The school opened the following month.

The Ralph Street School served the City's residents until the early 1980s. In the years since, it has housed non-profit organizations, including Head Start. It is now vacant and under consideration for adaptive reuse under the auspices of the Providence Redevelopment Agency.

Providence schoolhouse evolution post-Ralph Street School

A few years after this school opened in 1903, the U.S. Bureau of Education published *American Schoolhouses* (1910),¹¹ a detailed guide to physical aspects of the emergent "modern school." Recommendations and specifications in this copiously illustrated volume covered physical dimensions of classrooms and hallways, foundations, basements, and details of lighting, plumbing, cloakrooms, and furnace choice. As demonstrated with scores of halftone engravings of recently-built model schools, the book vigorously promoted the Colonial and Classical Revival styles as appropriate to the task of educating young American citizens.¹² John Hutchins

⁷ The Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-1920 caused a major rethinking of sanitation in public schoolhouses.

⁸ Mayor's Address, January 7, 1901. *City Documents*, p. 34.

⁹ Fluorescent lighting was introduced in the United States in 1938.

¹⁰ "New Primary School Houses Well-Appointed Buildings." *Providence Journal* (13 August 1902): 10. This article has a halftone reproduction of the school as built.

¹¹ Fletcher B. Dresslar. *American Schoolhouses*. U.S. Bureau of Education Bulletin 1910, No. 5.

¹² Carroll (1918), p. 256. It should also be noted that in 1911 the Rhode Island State Board of Education was empowered to "approve proper standards of lighting, heating, ventilation, seating and other sanitary arrangements for school buildings." Those standards were formally adopted in 1917.

Cady notes in his *Civic and Architectural Development of Providence* (1957): “By the year 1915 schoolhouse plans had become somewhat standardized, varying principally in exterior design.”¹³

Table 1
Providence schools of brick construction and approximate scale of Ralph Street School
 (1885-1924, listed chronologically)

School Name	Address	Date(s)	Architect	Notes
Smith St Primary	396 Smith Street	1885	William Walker	2 ½ story Queen Anne. Converted. Now office of Commonwealth Engineers and Consultants.
Asa Messer	158 Messer Street	1893	William Walker and Son	2.5-story, ornate Romanesque
Althea Street	245 Althea Street	1895	Listed in Prov Citywide, no architect named	2-story, raised basement, similar scale to Ralph St
Greeley Street	45 Greeley Street	1895		2-story, raised basement, similar scale to Ralph St
Ruggles Street	110 Ruggles Street	1895	Listed in Prov. Citywide Survey, but no architect named	2-story, attic, raised basement, similar scale to Ralph St
Ralph St Elementary	Ralph/Rye Street	1902	Angell & Swift	2-story, raised basement
Chalkstone Avenue	1246 Chalkstone Ave	1902	Angell & Swift	Similar in scale, built at same time as Ralph St
Webster Avenue Elementary	191 Webster Avenue	1904		3 story, larger scale
Veazie Street	211 Veazie Street	1909	Clarke, Howe and Homer	Unclear what part of 1909 construction survives
Windmill School	110 Paul St	1910, 1915, 1932		2, 3-story, raised basement
Carl G. Lauro Elementary	99 Kenyon Street	1921		Main block (city designed) appears to be of similar scale to Ralph St. Two large wings added post 1921
Reservoir Ave	156 Reservoir Avenue	1924		Designed by city. Original block is 2-story, similar scale to Ralph St., note additions

¹³ *Civic and Architectural Development of Providence*, p. 223.

Additional Information:

The following article appeared in the *Providence Journal*, August 13, 1902, p. 10.

NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL HOUSES WELL-APPOINTED BUILDINGS.

They Were Visited by the City Council Committee
on City Property.—Members Expressed Them-
selves as Pleased with the Facil-
ities Provided.

RALPH STREET SCHOOL HOUSE.

New structure was opened for inspection last evening.

The handsome new eight-room school house on Ralph street in the annexed district was opened last night for public inspection, and from 7 until 10 o'clock visitors were admitted to all rooms in the building, and Miss Mabel I. Lowe, the principal, and her corps of assistants, were busy receiving congratulations on their new home. Fully 1000 people took advantage of the opportunity to be present, and while the parade of people on tour of inspection blocked the spacious hallways, music was discoursed by the Estrio Trio, composed of the Misses Anderson, violin and piano, and Mr. White, bass viol. Throughout the evening chocolate was served in the basement.

From the top floor to the rear cellars lights were blazing, and visitors were welcome to examine minutely all apparatus and other furnishings, and as a result favorable comment was heard on all sides. Nothing in the line of formal programme was presented.

Plants and potted flowers were placed about the hallways and were the only decorations used. The building itself was attraction enough for the visitors, and as there are many improvements not to be found in other city schools they were viewed with interest. The general plan of the building was a pleasing study. In each room the seats are arranged to have the direct ray of light come over the left shoulder of the pupil. The desks are adjustable and this improvement was explained by Miss Le Garde, instructor of physical culture, to a number of interested observers. By bolts the desks, as well as the chairs, are held fast and can be adjusted readily. The construction of the seat necessitates the child sitting in a position not injurious, and the modern ventilating arrangements and slate blackboards were also pointed out as a vast improvement.

A feature of the new building attracting much attention was the wardrobe arrangement. The various rooms

are provided with a steel cage located in the hallways and with entrance only from the school room. Here the wraps can be placed and the arrangement is sufficiently large to accommodate an abundance of clothing. At the bottom of the cage the steam pipe extends and this arrangement will be found especially beneficial when the garments are hung wet.

The points mentioned are but few of the many attractive improvements in the building. In the kindergarten the children are provided with all necessary articles to broaden their minds, and as the small army of visitors passed from room to room former pupils were heard making laughable comparisons with the old structure, when such arrangements were not thought of.

But six of the eight rooms in the building are being occupied. On the first floor is the kindergarten and room 1, supervised by Miss Lowe. The Principal's office, a well arranged room, adjoins room 1. Misses Lila S. Johnson, Anna W. Gibson and Nellie C. Read have charge of the remaining rooms on the floor, and the two upper rooms in use are in charge of Misses Elizabeth Stafford and Mary B. Howland. On this floor is a well-appointed teachers room.

During the evening many prominent persons visited the school. Prominent among them were: Alderman G. R. Parker and Councilmen Littlefield, Johnson, San Souci and Darling of the Eighth Ward, and Councilman Whelden of the Second Ward. School Committeemen B. Frank Hopkins, Orasmus Taft, Joseph Cunningham, Dr. William White, J. O. San Souci and George S. Andrews. Miss Sarah Dyer Barnes, Assistant Superintendent of Schools; Miss Ellen Le Garde, instructor of physical culture; William E. Steere, Principal of Roosevelt Street Grammar School; H. C. Gorton, member of General Assembly, and Victor Horton, former Superintendent of Schools of Johnston, together with many former pupils at the school who are now public school teachers.

The school building was opened for the first time Monday of last week, and the inspection was invited, to allow the parents and friends of the children opportunity to see the pleasant surroundings enjoyed by the little ones.