

State needs to allow more schools like Lord Stirling

Those who have ever moved from a cramped, rundown apartment into something airier and roomier know that buildings do matter; that the quality of our lives depends to a great degree on our surroundings. And that is why the completion of Lord Stirling Community School is such a milestone for New Brunswick. It is not simply that a dilapidated, cramped old schoolhouse has been replaced with a sparkling new edition. It is that after years of running pictures of gorgeous new schools in suburban towns across the country, pictures this paper ran Friday were of a school serving some of the most disadvantaged kids in New Brunswick; now they, too have an auditorium, the latest computers and a technology lab.

The school is designed to become not only a center of learning for pre-schoolers through eighth graders but also a gathering place for the community. Its auditorium is expected to hold community plays; its gymnasium is big enough to host an adults' game; and it has a dentist's chair so students can get their teeth checked and cleaned on site. It is a "community school," in all aspects of the word, an asset not simply to the children, but to their parents and the city as a whole.

Unfortunately, Lord Stirling is all too uncommon. Not only is it the only new urban school opening this year-two years after the legislature set aside \$12 billion for new school construction – it also was built by the New Brunswick Development Corp., or Devco, the city's nonprofit redevelopment agency, in partnership with the school district and the city. There was also a great deal of community input. Although the Governor showed up at the school's opening, and lauded the building as a model that should be used statewide, the law that governs new school aid allows only six projects between redevelopment agencies, cities and districts in the entire state. Lord Stirling therefore might be a model, but under the law it will not be more than that.

Still, there does seem room inside the law to negotiate the kind of urban schools that are built, if not the agencies that are building them. In other words, the state itself will probably retain control of the building projects, but that does not preclude it from incorporating the most important aspects of Lord Stirling into the new schools it puts up in urban centers. But wishing won't make it happen.

If McGreevey truly supports community schools he needs to codify regulations for the departments overseeing urban construction so that those departments must seek community input and coordinate community funding in designing and building schools. They might use open-space funds, for example, to build a bigger playground that also functions as a community park. All of this is doable, but without a mandate from the Governor, there is real danger – since the law dictates that the schools are to be designed

and built by the state – of a raft of urban schools that serve ideals and special interests rather than real students, real parents and real communities.