



Center of Attention

by Cliff Hauptman

Pike's New Dahod Center for Community and Creative Learning

You can stand on the stage and speak in a normal voice without the help of a microphone, and everyone in the new theater at The Pike School can hear you just fine: even the people in the balcony; even the people way in the back.

They can see you just fine, too, from every one of the 280 seats in the house. It is a remarkable space, one of many in the recently dedicated Dahod Center for Community and Creative Learning.

The new building, constructed over a period of fourteen months, adds approximately 28,000 square feet of new and renovated space for music, art, and drama classrooms; learning services; conference and multipurpose rooms; technology; and the theater. Since the opening of school this year, response to the new facilities has been exuberant. Not only are visitors delighted by the gleaming beauty and impressive sweep of the now cohesive façade, but even a quick tour impresses them with the volume and radiance of the new classrooms, the caliber of the theater, and the notable expansion in general. Most importantly, however, students and faculty are imbued with an unmistakable new excitement around the arts at Pike.

The crux is the dedicated space and the impressive sophistication of the accoutrements. Time in classes need no longer be spent setting up and taking down because the Dining Room in which the class is rehearsing has to be readied for lunch. Performances need no longer be kept as conventional as possible because an audience seated in the Dining Room can neither see nor hear anything intricate. An energetic faculty with innovative ideas need no longer be frustrated by the “make do” constraints of limited space. And space-related limitations on equipment and apparatus are now relieved. When asked what excited him about the new ceramics studio, one Fifth Grader struck right at the heart of the matter: “I am excited about the new ceramics studio,” he wrote, “because



when we use clay in the new ceramics studio it will feel like we are professionals because we’re in an official room.”

Larry Robertson, head of the fine arts department and a teacher of music and music theater at Pike since 1977, echoes that sense of the professionalism provided by the new facilities. His new music classroom, equipped with risers upon which large choral groups can rehearse, was designed with acoustical excellence in mind. Unlike the old classrooms, singing in the new music classrooms sounds good, and he has been working there with groups of as many as thirty students. He will soon be moving the groups to the theater and looks forward, because of the excellent acoustics there, as well, to “the kids being able to hear themselves, which has never been the case. Using microphones,” he says, “as we did over in the cafeteria, is no substitute for good acoustics. You don’t

hear yourself. The sound is getting out there, but it’s a dead feeling. So this is going to be a different experience for them. And it looks like a real theater,” he adds. “This has real significance for the kids. They’re on a real stage performing for an audience, and it’s preparation for them going on to a secondary school, where they’ll surely have a theater. So if they are inclined to become involved in performing, they will have had that preparation. The kids who are interested in the technical side of theater, too, are going to have an opportunity here.”

Robertson has been deeply involved in the planning of the new wing from the beginning and is delighted with the results, which have exceeded his expectations. “Technically,” he says, “the facilities are a huge improvement: the acoustics, the lighting, the availability of sound reinforcement if you need it, and all the new arts facilities.” He is also impressed



Above: Larry Robertson’s Upper School music room, with its risers and sound baffles, provides a new, acoustically excellent, rehearsal venue, as well as a bright, voluminous, classroom space. **Below:** The new, glass corridor that connects the theater lobby and Farnsworth with the music and art classrooms is one of several light-filled spaces in the new Center.

Right, top: Carolyn Taylor leads the entire Lower School in song during the first-ever assembly in the new Community Room. **Right, bottom:** New storage spaces in the art rooms have made enormous differences not only to the variety of media available but also to the accessibility of materials during classes.

by the wing’s physical beauty and inviting character: the impression it makes upon one’s entering the driveway and the attractiveness of its glass corridors. “But what’s really important to me,” he says, “is that there is a statement being made by the Pike community that the arts are valued. And it’s made in a very big way.”

At Middle School Back-to-School Night in September, Carolyn Taylor, who has been the music teacher for the Lower and Middle Schools since 1985, reinforced that view, saying, “These new spaces... show the children that we respect their hard work by having them experience a legitimate performing space. This is a great opportunity for all of us.”

Taylor’s music classroom has been reconfigured and reequipped, also with improved acoustics afforded by baffles and carpeting, and has been rigged with a recording consol and ceiling-mounted microphone by which she can record rehearsals and burn CDs to help the children learn the songs for concerts and performances. “The sound,” says Taylor, “is really going to have the biggest impact. Because the kids, now, are going to really



be able to hear each other. And because of that, I've already started doing two- and three-part work a little more than usual. I had cut back on that because we couldn't hear what we were doing. But now, in the new theater, you can actually see and hear the kids singing, and they're going to hear each other, which is going to blow their minds when they get up there and start singing. They're really looking forward to that."

Enthusiasm is high among the visual arts, as well. For Vanessa Hynes, the Lower and Middle School art teacher for the past five years, the new ceramics studio is the biggest change, but she is also the beneficiary of new, much needed storage space and other necessities. The ceramics studio affords her the opportunity to enhance the arts curriculum for the Lower and Middle Schools. "I have, in the past, had clay at a few grades," she says, "and now I'm developing having clay at every grade." She is also working on a proposal to bring in a professional potter to work with at least one grade in each division every year. There are also proposals afloat to make the studio available for open studio time for students or for adult workshops.

Pike's well-attended, annual, student art show will benefit greatly from the new facilities. With plenty of new display spaces, much less dependence will be placed on the Dining Room. The show can now be set up, as Hynes puts it, "in such a way that it doesn't have to be taken down at 8:01," the same night as its opening. "The goal is to keep the show up longer and to move people throughout the school."

Upper School art classes have use of not only the ceramics studio, but also of a new photography darkroom that, in Chris Vivier's opinion, "exceeds what [the students] are going to run into even at the secondary level." Vivier is the new Upper School art teacher and a professional photographer in his own right. He knows darkrooms. "To have this new darkroom that's going to allow all of our students to work in there, and is state-of-the-art—some of the stuff we have in there is silver recovery and temperature control—is really something special," he says.

Questioned about the place of a spiffy, film-based darkroom at a time when digital photography has all but taken over, Vivier offers this insight: "When the camera was invented, everybody started saying, 'Nobody's ever going to paint again. Now

Photos: Cliff Hauptman



you can capture it perfectly; why would you paint it?" Yet obviously we all still paint. I don't think, in the arts, you can say that there's a better way to do anything. There's just the way that appeals to you. It's part of finding a process or medium that you simply enjoy putting your hands in. And when it comes to analog or film-based photography versus digital, it's a choice. And as with any medium, it's important to show students the breadth of possibility that exists."

The breadth of possibilities that exists for the Dahod Center seems, at this point, infinite. Weekly assemblies, which formerly were held in the Dining Room, now take place in the new conference room or the new theater, where students

no longer have to stack and unstack chairs and where those so inclined are moved by the dignity and polish of the space to offer musical performances for their classmates, to everyone's delight. Recently, through the auspices of Young Audiences of Massachusetts, the Bamidele Dancers and Drummers performed at two assemblies, conducted a two-week residency of workshops with a variety of students, and culminated their visit with an evening performance in the new theater, which included those students. That was the inaugural evening performance in the theater, which was filled to capacity with Pike parents, students, and faculty, and it promised to all who experienced it a future of extraordinary entertainment.





Learning services has also benefited from the new wing with a large, bright, airy classroom that can claim one of the best views in the school. Overlooking the fields and woods to the west, the new classroom provides ample space for all five learning specialists who work with Upper School students, locating them in closer proximity than previously to the students they teach and the faculty with whom they collaborate. Director of Learning Services Denise Elliott points out, too, that “having our own, attractive learning and working space makes a positive statement about Pike’s regard for learning services, rather than our having to eke out space in the corner of the Dining Room or Library.”

Fund raising for the \$11.5 million addition and renovation continues at a brisk pace and has already reached \$7.7 million. A seven-figure lead gift, the largest single gift ever given to Pike, was generously donated by the Dahod family, for whom the building is named. Ashraf and Shamim Dahod have two daughters who were graduated from The Pike School and, in fact, moved to Andover in 1991 so their eldest could

attend Pike. Shamim, a physician with her own practice in Chelmsford, has been a trustee at Pike for several years and sits on the board of directors at Boston University Medical School and the Dana Farber Breast Cancer Foundation. Ashraf, who came to the United States in 1971 from India, has started and sold several high-tech companies since his graduation from the University of Michigan and Stanford. Among their many philanthropic projects, the Dahods funded and oversaw the building of the \$15 million Dawoodi Bohra mosque off Interstate 495 in Billerica, which opened in 2004.

Within the new Center’s design is incorporated the practices and materials that reflect Pike’s commitments to sustainability and green design. Low-emittance glass fills the curved, two-story façade of the theater and peripheral gallery. Dual-flush toilets and low-flow aerators on faucets reduce water use in all restrooms; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) equipment uses ozone-friendly hydrofluorocarbons that contain no chlorine; energy recovery wheels reuse heat energy exhausted from



Left, top: The Bamidele Dancers and Drummers perform at an assembly in the new theater.
Left, center: A detail of dimmers and dials in the theater's professional-quality control booth.
Left, bottom: Middle and Upper Schoolers entertain parents and schoolmates with Bamidele in the theater's inaugural performance.
This page: A curved gallery for exhibiting student art forms the glass facade of the new theater.

See photos of the Center's construction at: http://www.pikeschool.org/home/supportpike/promise/con_gallery

the building; an occupancy controlled ventilation system in the theater automatically cuts energy use when no one is present; and energy efficient lights automatically turn on and shut off in all rooms and corridors, as sensors determine the presence or absence of people.

The new Dahod Center clearly has a lot to say. It is making statements about Pike's regard for the arts and their place in the curriculum. It is making statements about the importance of learning services in a supportive educational environment. It is extolling the value of community and the need for spaces in which people can get together and collaborate. It is affirming the Pike community's generosity in its support of educational excellence. And it is demonstrating Pike's commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship. It is currently at the center of everyone's attention not only because of what it has to say and because of its novelty, but also because of its enormous potential to provide benefits we have yet to imagine. ☀️

