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## Officials, students celebrate as beleaguered Sutton school building officially opens



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Madeline and Emily Day of the Sutton Middle School Student Council and Curtis Flannery, the Sutton High School senior class president, cut the ribbon Wednesday during the Sutton Memorial Middle/High School open ceremony. T&G Staff/Christine Hochkeppel



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SUTTON - Massachusetts School Building Authority Executive Director Jack McCarthy told a crowd of parents, school staff, town leaders and state elected officials gathered Wednesday in a landscaped courtyard at the new Sutton Memorial Middle/High School that if this building project had a title, it would be, "What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger."

After delays and payment problems with the project's original contractor, TLT Construction Corp., which led to the termination of that contract in 2013 and the hiring of Brait Builders Corp. in 2014 to complete the \$64 million complex, this school year started with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and all 800 or so students in their proper place.

No more were high school students being taught in the new middle school, nor were there any modular buildings occupying the front lawn for middle schoolers, as had been the case for the last several years.

It was, Mr. McCarthy said, "a happy conclusion."

"We're not on time," he said, referring to the roughly one-year delay in the total project which began with a funding award in 2011, "but we're a little under budget."

He praised the efforts of former state Rep. Jennifer Callahan, a Sutton Democrat, who helped launch the project. "She was relentless with us," Mr. McCarthy said.

Superintendent of Schools Theodore F. Friend told the crowd, "I am probably the most knowledgeable construction superintendent in the state of Massachusetts." He quipped he was glad to return to being a school superintendent who didn't have to worry anymore about change orders.

Students actually moved into the new complex in late March and early April.

Town Administrator James A. Smith said in an interview that the final contractors, Brait Builders, were "outstanding" and two of the Brait brothers set up an office in the high school as their command post. "They didn't take anything for granted," Mr. Smith said.

Wendy Mead, who has chaired the School Building Committee since 2007, said Wednesday's ribbon-cutting milestone felt "incredibly wonderful. It's been a long time in coming."

Sutton was the first school district under the restructured state reimbursement system, administered through the MSBA instead of the Department of Education, to go through such daunting issues with a contractor and figure out what was within its authority to do about nonperformance.

"It's really been a learning curve," she said, as town and state officials worked through the process together.

The MSBA is reimbursing the town for 53.5 percent of the project's costs, slightly higher than projected because the building meets sustainability standards, according to Ms. Mead.

While officials reflected on the challenging route the project took, students were simply thrilled to be in their new school.

"The library is amazing," said Anthony Fraioli, a senior who had been a student in the old buildings and the modular classrooms.

His sister, Natalie Fraioli, a sophomore, said, "It's more comfortable. It's better energy than the pods. It (the modulars) felt like a doctor's office."

"It's been a crazy, crazy ride... but we're finally home," said Arianna Cusick, a sophomore who was leading tours of the new middle and high school.

Senior Emily Perry said she loved the new art rooms. "I want to go to college for art," she said. "There's two art rooms now so there's more to do - a clay room and a drawing room."

Parents, too, were pleased. Geoff Cushner, who has 7th-grade twins, recalled the old school building with leaks, faulty electrical systems, inadequate classrooms, overcrowding and other factors which led to the school's accreditation being in jeopardy a decade ago.

"It's first-class amenities. The kids really enjoy it," Mr. Cushner said about the new building. "It was overdue."

The airy, green-designed complex is state of the art.

Every classroom in the new building has a smartboard that hooks up to a computer to project and manipulate digital information.

Science labs are designed for hands-on exploration.

A music lab has keyboards wired to computers, along with convenient lockers for storing musical instruments nearby.

A new middle school gym complements the renovated Stephen C. Romasco Gymnasium in the "hinge" area between the middle and high school wings. A fitness center rivals any health club for exercise resources.

Selectman David Hall, board chairman, described the striking 280-seat theater in the heart of the complex as "a meeting place for our town... and a cultural center."

Outside the theater are two installations by Sutton High School graduates who pursued careers in art.

The walls surrounding the theater entry feature tin tiles on which pencil sketches of artistic and spiritual themes were transferred. The project took 400 hours for Alyssa Kerr, Sutton High School class of 2008 and a Brandeis University graduate who works as a graphic designer for the Boston Conservatory, to complete.

"It was my first commission as an artist," Ms. Kerr said. "There's a lot of symbolism in these pieces."

Four banners with artistic images flutter colorfully over the courtyard entrance to the theater lobby, the work of Alissa Rakauskas, who graduated from Sutton High School in 2009 and Skidmore College in 2013.

Mark Bailey, a high school art teacher and member of the School Building Committee, said, "When you work with students and you watch their progression, it's remarkable. It's just a sense of satisfaction."

It was a sentiment of gratefulness and celebration expressed by many that day.

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