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The Boston Globe

At Hyde Park complex, graduation is bittersweet

Students in facility set to close share memories, look ahead



Mukiya Adams hugged her daughter Stephanie, 19, after the graduation at the Engineering School. (Essdras M Suarez/Globe Staff)

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)
Globe Correspondent / June 17, 2011

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At public high schools across Boston, students and faculty are bidding farewell to the class of 2011 at bittersweet commencements and social gatherings big and small.

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But at the Engineering School in Hyde Park, an additional note of finality hovers over the pomp and circumstance: The school will close after the academic year ends this month, one of 18 public schools the city will shutter or merge by next fall to help plug a \$63 million

shortfall.

This year's Engineering School graduates wonder how they will maintain sentimental ties to a place that no longer exists. And students who will be attending new schools next year worry about maintaining friendships forged at the six-year-old high school, one of three in the former Hyde Park High School building.

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Tamieka Banks-Tillman, a junior who watched friends collect the school's final diplomas last week, said her classmates will face more hectic circumstances one year from now: They will all be going back and forth to each others' graduations.

"Most of us have been together since our freshman year," Banks-Tillman said. "We had our ups and downs with each other. We have different cliques and groups, but at the end of the day, we all come together as one. . . . We're all one big family."

Graduates, students, faculty, and staff at the school described what they will cherish most — and it has little to do with the building that will soon be locked and empty.

"Definitely the people, definitely the people," said Fausto Concepcion, 17, one of 35 students of the school's departing senior class. The school has a student body of 330.

The Social Justice Academy, on the floor above, will also close. The third school in the complex, the Community Academy of Science and Health, will relocate to Dorchester.

The largest of the building's two gymnasiums, shared by all three schools, holds countless memories. It was where boys' sports teams would playfully battle girls' teams for the coveted practice arena.

Athlete or not, it was the spot to meet during free periods and after classes dismissed for the day, students said.

More than anything, the facility will be missed as a space where the school communities united to cheer on the athletic teams they shared.

"The best place for every student was really the gym," said graduating senior Alonzo Paul.

Decked out in black and yellow caps and gowns for last week's commencement, the graduates were showered with hugs, kisses, balloons, flowers, and bellowing cheers inside the building's hot, stuffy auditorium as evening thunder boomed outside.

Chanel Smitherman graduated last year and returned to watch some of her younger friends celebrate the milestone. After studying her first year of college out of state, she is transferring to Wentworth Institute of Technology in the fall. She says she is devastated to learn that her high school alma mater will cease to exist and that teachers she recalls fondly are scattered.

"It's going to be really hard without them, not having them around in one place to come back to," the 19-year-old said, after she embraced and reconnected with several of them at the graduation.

"They're not just like teachers to us," Paul said. "They're like aunts and uncles. That's how I see them."

Valedictorian Anne Saint Pierre also echoed the theme of school as family, as did physics teacher Erica Wilson.

"It's going to be very difficult to find another community of adults and students like this," Wilson said.

City school officials say they have launched "all-hands-on-deck" initiatives to support displaced students and customize how they cope with the closings and mergers, said Denise Snyder, head of the school district's enrollment and

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Community Academy of Science and Health students, for example, will have a welcome tour of their new school building in late August.

"There's certainly no cookie-cutter approach to this," she said.

Rachelle Pierre, a junior at the Social Justice Academy, has been accepted to another city high school for her senior year, but is waiting to hear back from her top choice.

Rising sophomore Raymond Tejada, who attends Social Justice Academy, is excited to enroll in New Mission High School in Roxbury next year, but acknowledges that he would have preferred to stay where he was.

Next fall, he said, "It's going to feel like I'm a freshman again."

Matt Rocheleau can be reach at mjrochele@gmail.com. ■

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