

## Fire-damaged school reopens in Bellingham

By LYNN PORTER

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After a 2009 fire extensively damaged historic Whatcom Middle School, people in Bellingham decided they wanted to save it.

"It was a community icon," said John Jones, principal at the architectural firm Dykeman. "Nobody wanted to see it torn down. Everyone wanted to rebuild it."

But fire burned the length of the 1903 school's main building. Jones said the fire coupled with water damage, "essentially destroyed that building. The walls were practically useless."

So instead of rebuilding the old school, the team recreated it.

Dykeman used essentially the original design, but added up-to-date technology and materials, including new light fixtures with a historic feel. Dawson Construction built the "new" school.

Reid Middleton was the civil and structural engineer, and Hargis was the mechanical, electrical and plumbing engineer. Cascade Design Collaborative was landscape architect. George Bundy & Associates designed the kitchen and Greenbusch did acoustical design.

The old school's walls were used as a design guide and support for forms into which workers put shotcrete, a low-water mixture of concrete that quickly sticks to a form.

An acrylic paint finish mixed with sand material was applied to the concrete to simulate the stucco in the old school.

The gym, auditorium, music building and shops were repaired and saved, and key elements of the main entry facade were retained.

The team substituted less costly materials for expensive ones that had been used in the original school. For instance, real sandstone was originally used at the base of the main building. In the recreated school, an artistic finish was applied to shotcrete to mimic the sandstone.

Embellishments at the tops of exterior columns were replicated using foam covered with acrylic paint.

The school had been expanded over the years, and the historic 1903 entry was boarded up. The team reopened the entry and created a courtyard outside.

Workers were careful to shield the community, which was sensitive about the state of its icon, Jones said. So it razed the original walls after the new ones were formed. "There are a lot of people in Bellingham that don't know that we tore the school down."

The project cost \$14.7 million for everything except stabilization work, and the core and shell of the main building.

Work was fast-tracked to get the school open this fall, a year earlier than Bellingham Public Schools had anticipated, Jones said.

He said the recreated school's exterior almost mirrors the old one.

"I don't think you'd know that it was different. I think that even if you looked at a photograph you wouldn't know it was different, other than it's a little bigger because we had to build the (new) walls outside the old walls."



Photo courtesy of Dykeman [\[enlarge\]](#)

The architect said the building was essentially destroyed, but the team was able to recreate it using the old walls as a design guide and supports.