

[Mostly Schools](#)

Community Celebrates Middle School Groundbreaking

The new Portola Middle School campus being built on the site of the closed Castro Elementary School is expected to be completed December 2015.

Posted by [Betty Buginas](#), June 2, 2013 at 06:52 pm



County Supervisor John Gioia at the June 2, 2013 groundbreaking for Portola Middle School.

Speeches from politicians and educators, performances by musicians from Portola Middle and local elementary schools, and dignitaries shoveling dirt made it official on June 2: construction of El Cerrito's [new middle school](#) is finally under way.

The “new” middle school will actually be a reincarnation of the old Castro Elementary School on Donal Avenue between Lawrence and Norvell. The campus will undergo a renovation much like the transformation of the El Cerrito Plaza. Some buildings will be demolished and some renovated. New construction will be added, and the layout of the grounds changed to the point that the new campus will bear little resemblance to the old one. The new campus is expected to be completed by December 2015.

Castro students, staff, parents, and neighbors learned more than five years ago that their

school would be closed to make room for a new version of Portola. The school district originally planned to rebuild on the current site at Navellier and Moeser, but discovered that the combination of slide and earthquake threat meant that site did not meet strict state standards for the construction of a public school. It then decided to take over Fairmont Elementary School, but public outcry convinced it that that site wasn't suited for a middle school and further study resulted in a decision to use Castro instead.

In her comments Sunday, former school board member Karen Pfeifer recalled being told that unstable conditions at the Navellier site could result in the loss of hundreds of lives.

El Cerrito City Councilwoman Janet Abelson remembered the damage to the Navellier campus, primarily the gym, during 1989's Loma Prieta earthquake, when one of her daughters was a student at the school. That quake struck at about 5 p.m., but Abelson said her child could have been among the injured or dead if it had struck during the school day.

"You don't forget something like that," she said.

Although all five of her children are out of school, she said it is important that all children to have safe schools where they receive a good education.

Superintendent Bruce Harter said a document from the state indicating Portola students needed to be moved to a safer location was one of the first items that greeted him when he came to the West Contra Costa Unified School District in 2006.

County Supervisor John Gioia said he was happy there had been no major earthquake on the Hayward fault when he was a student at Portola. He praised West County as "a community that supports education" as evidenced by its approval of bond measures to fund rebuilding of district schools. He also put in a plug for support of Governor Brown's proposal to provide extra funding to districts like West Contra Costa where, Gioia said, the student population is more expensive to educate than in some districts.

More than a year after the decision to take over Castro was final, at the end of the 2008-09 school year, Castro's remaining students and staff were scattered among other area schools.

Castro's windows were long ago board up and weeds grow tall in front of the main building. But hurdles standing in the way of the rebuild – primarily an unsuccessful lawsuit by some neighbors to block the project – have finally been cleared.

In his comments, school board member Charles Ramsey noted, "We all just hung in there, kept the faith." Ramsey, who has been on the school board for 20 years and was praised by several speakers for his efforts to pass bonds to rebuild schools, said El Cerrito, Kensington, and Richmond, can always be counted on to support school measures by a large margin.

[The old Portola campus on Navellier was demolished](#) but work stopped for months to let the ground dry out. Excavation and grading have resumed in recent weeks and the site should be ready for hydro-seeding in a month or two, according to bond regional facilities project manager Andrew Mixer. A joint school district/city council task force is working on making the site available to the city for recreational uses.

Portola students now attend school in portable buildings on the lower, more stable portion of the hilly site. Once they move to the new campus, those portables will be used to house students from Fairmont Elementary School while that school (next to the El Cerrito library) is rebuilt.

Galen Murphy, who was the last principal of Castro and is now principal of Fairmont, told the crowd: "I thought this day would never come."

She said Castro was a unique school, particularly known as a leader in "full inclusion" of students with special needs in regular education classes. That program was one of the reasons some families fought hard to stop the closure of the school. While the situation put Fairmont and Castro into a somewhat adversarial position, she says she, six other staff members, and about 100 students from Castro have been welcomed into the Fairmont community.

Portola Principal Matthew Burnham said the school community looks forward to the amenities the new facility will provide, like a gym, a library fully stocked with books and technology, and space for student performances. Burnham said it is the perfect time for the community to commit itself to turning Portola into an exemplary school.

###