

# Historic Whitted School to open after 40 years of empty classrooms



*Whitted School, now accompanied by a construction fence, sits ready for ground breaking on renovations, which will begin in late February or early March. (Staff Photo by Tanner Boggs)*

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When Bruce dePyssler first saw Whitted School, he was intrigued by the history surrounding the building. Now nearly four years after his documentary, “Upbuilding Whitted School” premiered, groundbreaking is set for its renovation.

Groundbreaking is set to occur around the end of February, and dePyssler and his documentary crew can finally see a light at the end of the tunnel on a project they first approached in 2011. For dePyssler, knowing that he and his crew had some impact on the resurrection of the historic building is highly rewarding.

“It’s a great source of pride to me and the rest of the crew, April Leanne Simon, Purity Kimaiyo and Chi Brown, to have played some small part in drawing attention to the importance of rescuing this historic building,” dePyssler said.

Before closing in the mid-1970s, Whitted School operated as the first black grade school in North Carolina. The school was a major feature of the thriving African-American Hayti community of Durham.

## Whitted School Timeline

1935 - Opened as the first black grade school in North Carolina

1970s - closed as a school, but maintained as office space

2005 - vacated completely

2011- “Upbuilding Whitted School” documentary begins

After it closed in the mid-1970s, the surrounding community suffered, and the once thriving Hayti community ground to a halt.

Almost 40 years later, plans are underway to renovate and redevelop Whitted School into a mixed-use facility, combining preschool classrooms and senior living apartments.

Named after a prominent black family in early Durham, Whitted School holds an important place in the history of Durham’s African-American community, making residents like Durham School Board member Minnie Forte-Brown cherish its significance.

“It has its tentacles deep in the roots of Durham history for blacks,” said Forte-Brown, who attended Whitted for eighth grade. “It sits in the heart of what we call Hayti, the thriving community where blacks made so much progress.”

When the school closed in the 1970s, much of the surrounding neighborhood suffered dearly. But many, including Rev. Michael Page, Antioch Baptist Church pastor and county commissioner, believe the renovation will help the surrounding community rebound. For Page, it all starts with the younger generation.

“This is going to be great for kids to have an opportunity for preschool education. It will be really close to many of the homes of the children in the community,” Page said. “We really like the concept of the seniors being a part of that because seniors are a generation of parents that are key to helping to build our children. I think the two are a nice connection that go hand in hand.”

By emphasizing preschool education, community leaders like Page and Forte-Brown hope to reestablish the connection between community and education that was lost when Whitted closed.

Much like Page, Forte-Brown believes the establishment of expanded preschool services, along with the unique involvement of senior citizens, will place the community’s emphasis back on the education of its youngest residents. By establishing expanded preschool services, community leaders hope to eventually move to a publicly funded preschool for all.

As for Forte-Brown, this is just the beginning of what many in the community see as a step in the right direction, especially for the youngest generation.

“It’s exciting,” she said. “Eight classrooms for children with over 140 children in the building — 3 and 4-year-olds — that’s fantastic.”