Historic BR school expanded

BY CHARLES LUSSIER
Advocate staff writer

A mix of old and new is emerging on the corner of Government and South 19th streets.

Dufrocq Elementary, built in 1920, where the children are known as Ducks, has spent the past two years undergoing a $20 million renovation and expansion. The teachers and students have spent that time a few miles away in another old school building, one slated to be torn down.

The designers on the Dufrocq project have taken pains to have the new mirror, or at least echo, the old.

During a recent tour of not-yet-finished Dufrocq, Earl Kern, who manages construction projects for the East Baton Rouge Parish school system, pointed to the brick. On the newer half of the school, the brick is fresher and redder, but it shares the same wire-cut as the brick on the original half.

“It’s the closest you’re ever going to find,” Kern said.

Principal Mary Robvais said she attended a meeting April 20 to talk about the plans, but has yet to take a tour herself. With just a few weeks of school left, she and her teachers still need to pack up their stuff and make several decisions.

“I have not assigned classrooms yet (to teachers), but I am going to work on that very soon,” Robvais said.

The newer half of Dufrocq is one floor, but that’s not immediately obvious. The school system long ago quit building multi-story schools like the original two-story school. But architects with Remson Haley Herpin disguised the difference by building the new portions of the school taller than the average one-story building.

The original building is getting some modern touches. General contractor Cangelosi Ward has installed restrooms on the second floor and a small elevator.

The school has replaced the windows with ones equally picturesque, but more energy-efficient.

“Even with all the new technology, your energy use at this new school is going to go way down,” said Sam Herpin, one of the architects on the project.

To expand the school, the school system bought up much of the surrounding property, even de-dedicating part of Spain Street. That has allowed Dufrocq for the first time to stretch all the way to Government Street.

The expanded school still has its main entrance along South 19th Street, but, the portion facing Government Street, where the renovated school will be seen by the most people, will have some visual appeal.

Large windows are fronted by a lengthy planter for shrubs and flowers and playgrounds for children. The school’s slightly revised new name, The Dufrocq School, was carved days ago onto the Government Street facade, mirroring the lettering on the original part of the school.

Still, with Dufrocq less than four months from reopening, it’s not clear who exactly will occupy the school.

The original plan, since voters renewed a 1-cent sales tax in 2003, was that the school system would build one school in place of the three old buildings that served the downtown Baton Rouge area, namely Dufrocq, Nicholson and South Boulevard elementaries.

After a couple of years of looking for property, the school system decided to expand Dufrocq and have it serve as that school.

The expanded Dufrocq was to serve not only the downtown and Midcity areas, but would house Dufrocq’s Montessori program, as well as the larger foreign language immersion program at South Boulevard.

In 2004, the school system closed Nicholson and now leases that building to Children’s Charter School.

South Boulevard parents, however, have fought the closure of their school. Earlier this month, several School Board members agreed with their concerns.