

Mpls St Paul

March 1, 2020

Royal Flush

Is the solution to awkward adolescence
hiding in the school bathroom?

by Sheila Mulrooney Eldred

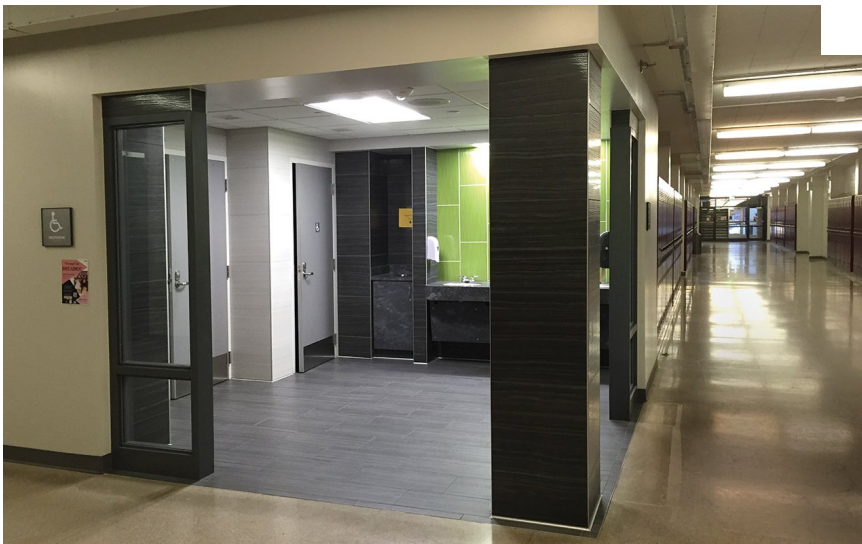


Photo courtesy of Saint Paul Public Schools

Current seniors at Johnson Senior High School, on St. Paul's east side, will graduate this spring never having experienced a staple of high school life: traditional boys' and girls' bathrooms. In 2016, facilities staff

pulled out the cinder block, gender-segregated bathrooms from 1963—the type where a kid might duck her head to identify which stalls are occupied or where a BFF is hiding. The replacement restrooms look so radically different that many adult visitors don't recognize them as bathrooms.

“That's what we deal with most,” says assistant principal Kevin Davis. “Visitors and adults will be looking for the bathrooms, and often they're standing right in front of them.”

You may have encountered something similar at trendy new restaurants or university student centers. Single-occupancy, floor-to-ceiling stalls flank one wall surrounded by an open or glassed-in common space with mirrors and sinks.

In schools, these mixed-gender restrooms claim prime real estate: usually the corners of high-traffic routes, so they're in plain view of students and staff. At Johnson High, one of the first schools in the country to implement the design and apparently the first in Minnesota, one bank of restrooms sits right between the school's main entrance and the cafeteria.

These state-of-the-art restrooms can drastically reduce the problems that occur under the fluorescent lights of the traditional school bathroom, which you still find in the vast majority of schools. Almost a third of LGBTQ+ students in Minnesota say they've been denied access to bathrooms that align with their gender, according to a 2017 report from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. And the Muslim community wanted private spaces for ritual washing. The addition of cell phones and vaping piles on challenges to an already uncomfortable space.

“If someone wanted to go to the bathroom and meet someone, that can happen pretty easily because everyone’s got a phone,” says Ray Aponte, who retired from South High School last spring after 33 years in Minneapolis Public Schools. Sometimes “they’re fixing to get a little naughty in there, doing things they’re not supposed to. You can just imagine what high schoolers do, and it’s happening in the bathroom.”



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A perfect confluence of events presented an opportunity for Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) to find out what would happen if it radically redesigned this one overlooked, undersupervised room. In 2015, the district had voted in favor of a more expansive gender-inclusion policy. Schools would need to ensure access to facilities that best aligned with a student’s gender identity. (Most school districts in Minnesota do not follow similar policies.)

Around the same time, the facilities department developed a new master plan, and Johnson’s vintage plumbing needed repair. SPPS consulted its own experts: the district’s Gender and Sexual Diversity Parent Advisory Council; the advocacy group Out for Equity; and, of course, the end users. Johnson High

students quickly became well versed in issues like bullying, vaping, gender equity, sex, gambling, digital privacy, fighting, and religious tolerance. These discussions rolled out against a backdrop of toilet paper, pee, menstruation, and bowel movements.

But the main concern? Kids wanted more privacy.

That goal presented a design challenge. Bathrooms would need to serve two seemingly opposing purposes: Afford both greater privacy and greater transparency. The district's Gender and Sexual Diversity Parent Advisory Council and Out for Equity had heard about innovative all-gender bathroom designs that had appeared in Philadelphia. SPPS partnered with local architecture firms (including TKDA and Cuningham Group) to tackle the design and navigate building codes.

The outcome of this experiment? The district's efforts to provide equitable facilities for marginalized communities ended up offering benefits for all students.

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During a recent lunch period, Angela Selb-Sack, lead senior project manager for the inclusive restroom model for SPPS, takes me on an architectural tour of the facility—or the facilities, as it were. In one washroom, kids wander in and out of the seven stalls. Inside each stall, high-gloss walls deter graffiti. The stall lock snaps to a reassuring red “SECURE” mode.

The whole setup—from the apple-green wall tile to the wavy slate-gray floor tile—looks as if it came straight out of a high-end design showroom. A girl checks her Afro in a mirrored column. A boy wearing AirPods

gazes through the glass into the busy hallway as he washes his hands.

If a door has been closed longer than usual, Johnson High principal Micheal Thompson will knock, asking, “Are you doing something real in there?”

In the old bathrooms, he adds, “I would have walked in, and five kids would have been doing something stupid—playing with dice or smoking or vaping.”

He can tick off the improvements conferred by the new bathroom designs:

- **Bullying:** There’s no place to whisper out of adult earshot in the new spaces. You’re just as likely to wash your hands next to your physics teacher as your frenemy. Johnson cites zero reports of bullying in the new bathrooms.
- **Fighting:** “The new bathrooms allow us to see much more clearly when students’ emotions are heightened and when they seem to be moving toward a conflict,” Thompson says. As senior Dajuan Avant puts it, “I don’t think it’s possible to fight in those bathrooms.”
- **Gambling:** Thompson used to discover six to eight gambling sessions a year. Now it’s down to one or two (and they occur in other areas of the building).
- **Predatory digital images:** When a student at another school shoved a school-issued iPad, in record mode, under a stall door, the kid in the stall stomped on it. Doors in the new bathrooms are cut to a close tolerance. Now, no device can (literally) slide through the cracks.
- **Religious inclusivity:** Muslim students—here, generally Somali—can participate in ritual washing in the new bathrooms. A key-coded closet and sink provide space in the wheelchair-accessible stalls.

- **Graffiti:** Graffiti is so prevalent in school bathrooms that the SPPS maintenance team frequently dedicated time to removing it. At Johnson, new graffiti appeared “almost weekly” in the old bathrooms. It’s shown up just five or six times in the past three years, Thompson says. And staff tracked down all but one of the offenders by looking through video footage. (Carefully positioned cameras record everyone going in and out of the stalls, but nothing inside the stalls).
- **Gender equity:** When Dave Edwards’s then second grader, who is transgender, saw the new bathrooms at her SPPS elementary school, she said, “Isn’t this awesome that there aren’t girls’ and boys’ bathrooms? Now the bathroom can just be a bathroom for everyone. It isn’t even like you have to make a choice!” “It takes away a tremendous barrier,” says Clark Hoelscher, a program specialist in SPPS’s Department of Equity. “I’ve had students who avoid school because they don’t want to navigate bathrooms.”



Photo courtesy of Saint Paul Public Schools

Horace Mann elementary’s restroom anticipates other redesigns slated throughout Saint Paul Public Schools.

Some complaints persist: Student leaders try to combat “disrespectful behavior” by snapping pictures of pee on

the toilet seats and floor. They display these shots of shame on video screens at assemblies.

Staff had worried about potential sexual encounters in private stalls. And administrators did find a male-female couple in the same stall once. (We'll let you imagine their teenage excuse.) But what might be the number one behavior problem plaguing high schools—vaping—occurs in every type of bathroom, principals say.

The “miracle bathrooms” also come with a hefty price tag that not every school district can afford, says Aponte, who now works as adventures director for The Loppet Foundation.

“It’s all great and dandy for suburban schools with new construction. But to do it in existing buildings, it costs a lotta, lotta, lotta money,” Aponte says. “And then you have to decide, do you have quality busing or bathrooms or computers?”

SPPS has committed to funding bathroom renovations in every school, K–12—despite an additional cost of \$12,500 per stall. Kids are already flushing new toilets in 10 SPPS schools. On deck for construction later this year: American Indian Magnet, Frost Lake Elementary, and the District Service Facility.

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So what is high school like without that cinder block hell? These kids don’t know, because they never experienced it.

“It’s like going to the bathroom at home,” Che Xia Lor says.

A survey seemed to confirm students' positive-to-neutral feelings about the bathrooms, a response that at first concerned Heidi Neumueller, a senior associate at Cunningham Group, in Minneapolis. But they've since landed on another interpretation: Going to the bathroom shouldn't be a big deal—and no longer is.

“No one should have to think about going to the bathroom,” Neumueller says.



When I asked a group of five student leaders if it would really be such a big deal to return to the old school bathrooms, they became passionate: Yes!

“When I walk into Harding’s bathrooms, I feel dirty,” Dajuan Avant says of neighboring Harding High School.

Che Xia Lor, a senior, agrees. “When we play volleyball at Harding, I don’t go unless I really have to,” she says.

On the subject of sports, guess what’s next in queue for a school update: the locker room.

This article originally appeared in the March 2020 issue.

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March 1, 2020 12:00 AM