

# Finding a home for those trying to find their place



Tommy Peaches helped carry a chalkboard from The City Inc. The school had an enrollment of 85 students last year in grades seven through 12.

- The City Inc.'s alternative high school program doesn't belong in Northrop elementary school, many neighbors say.

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**O**n the south side of Minneapolis, an elementary school building sits empty. Flowers grow in the outside planter, but weeds have made their home there as well.

The Minneapolis school district wants to find a tenant for the school. The City Inc. wants to lease it for its south Minneapolis school program.

Deal? It isn't that simple.

Many neighborhood residents say The City Inc.'s alternative school program for 85 teenagers doesn't belong in Northrop school, 1611 E. 46th St. A public meeting on the proposal drew nearly 300 people last month. Last week, residents made their case again to school board members.

"The neighborhood has consistently stated ... that they oppose any reuse of the facility that would involve teenagers or secondary students," said Paulette Wilson, president of the Field Regina Northrop Neighborhood Group board. "The neighborhood has repeatedly communicated our concern about the high concentration of at-risk youth this reuse would present."

"All we really want is a chance to be good neighbors," said Delon Smith, principal of The City Inc.'s south side program.

Of all the school buildings being closed and reused in Minneapolis these days, Northrop elementary has faced the most opposition, said school board member Colleen Moriarty, who sits on the reuse planning committee.

## Northrop offers 'a better shot'

Northrop's building and location are much better for The City's students than its former location on Lake Street, said President and CEO Fred Easter. The old building does not have a stove, a stage or a gym. Some rooms do not have windows.

"If you put kids in a pleasant setting, you have a better shot than if you put them in the basement of a bank branch and then teach them about the great things in the world outside," Easter said.

Northrop, he said, "gives us the possibility to have a first-class education, to challenge kids and expose them to the widest range of opportunities."

Javonna Turner, 18, graduated from The City Inc. after stints at Roosevelt, Southwest and another alternative school and hopes to attend a historically black college in Atlanta. Unlike some of her classmates, Turner chose to attend The City Inc. Some students come to The City Inc. because they weren't succeeding at traditional high schools. Others are on probation. Some have been identified as gang members.

"I don't think all of The City Inc. kids are bad," Turner said. "The person that doesn't have the kid with the learning disability, the person who doesn't have the kid that doesn't fit in, doesn't have a lot of money, doesn't have the mom or dad who isn't there ... when people don't have the problems they don't worry about it."

Julia Inz Arneson, a juvenile court public defender, works with students like those who attend the school. She also is a Northrop resident and among those who see it as a bad fit for Northrop school. "These are my clients, too," Arneson said. "I represent a lot of good kids, but some of them do bad things."

## The role of race is debated

Residents have their hands full with the social service programs already in the area, said Valerie Gunderson, a Northrop resident and incoming board member of the neighborhood group. "This feels like one more thing they can't possibly take on," she said.

Easter said that the residents view his students as criminals and not students. "Any kid who is affiliated with a gang but is coming to school every day is looking for another way," Easter said.

"Of course race plays a role," Easter said. Most of The City Inc. students are black. "But what makes the most sense is that people have an immense opposition to change."

Arneson and other residents said race is not the issue. "If you knew my neighbors, I don't think you can make that assumption," Arneson said.

Mikael Rudolph, a theater professional who has lived in the Northrop neighborhood for four months,



Photos by ELIZABETH FLORES • eflores@startribune.com

The City Inc.'s old school at 1545 E. Lake St. sits empty. The group wants to lease a closed elementary school in south Minneapolis, and some neighbors are nervous about it.

hasn't made up his mind about the proposal.

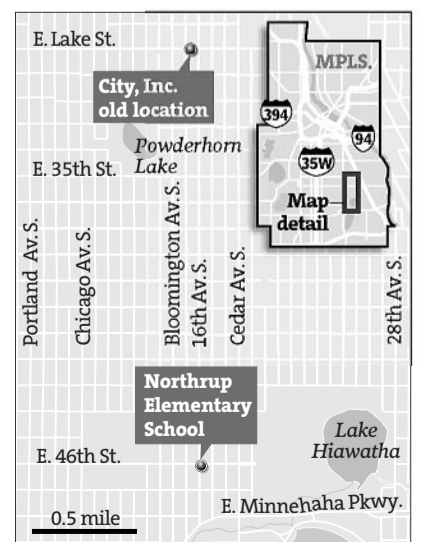
"Having just moved from the north side, I've done 10 years battling teenagers, punks, gang bangers and wannabees," he said. "I feel the burden is on the creators of the proposal to show us that bringing 90 or so troubled teenagers and releasing them into the neighborhood is not going to have a negative impact."

But he also wonders about the neighborhood's reaction. "If this were an alternative high school that was drawing students from Edina and Eden Prairie, would they be crying out so much?" he said. "The denial of racism was a little bit too strong."

Northrop is one of 13 Minneapolis school buildings closed since 2005, and one of seven offered for lease. According to the district website, all leases were to be arranged by July 1.

No leases have been written, Moriarty said. When all the properties are leased, "it will save the district up to \$5 million over five years," she said.

"I hope we find a good place for the alternative school that is more welcoming," Moriarty said. "The concerns about The City Inc. proposal have been duly noted."



Source: ESRI, TeleAtlas