

Explosion on Jan. 18 darkens, closes Melrose High

By LIZ JENNINGS

MELROSE — At about 1:15 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 18, there was an explosion at Melrose High that caused the entire school to lose power and sent all students home early.

The evacuation took place in the dark because a backup generator failed, something discussed by the School Committee this week.

According to Fire Chief John J. O'Brien, a foreman with the subcontractor Griffin Electric was working on a 440 volt line when there was an explosion that shook the whole building and launched the work-clear across a room.

Fortunately, the explosion blew the man away from the dangerous electrical current. He was protected by his shield, gloves, hard hat and Kevlar suit.

The explosion occurred in a transformer room near the Marcoux Gym. The Fire Department's Ladder 1 crew under the direction of Lt. Rich Fink arrived on the scene as the school was being evacuated. The firefighters attempted to go to their assignment but never made it, O'Brien explained. They were waved up Melrose Street by a teacher and met by the injured worker.

Heavy smoke poured out of the transformer room as individuals ran from the

scene. Firefighters crawled into the room and extinguished the fire. The injured man was transported to Mass. General Hospital for treatment. He suffered first degree burns on his face and neck, along with some second degree burns.

"He is a very, very lucky man. The only reason he lived was because he wore all his safety equipment," said the fire chief.

The incident occurred in the middle of a wind storm that caused a number of problems all across the city but were unrelated to the explosion. O'Brien said that the school evacuated without a problem despite the darkness and some evacuation routes being blocked from construction. He

attributed an efficient and successful evacuation to regular school fire drills and to following procedure.

At the Tuesday, Jan. 24 School Committee meeting, MHS student representatives gave an interesting narrative of what happened that day. "Near the end of the day," one senior noted, "the lights flickered and shortly after that they went out completely. It was pitch black and the generator lights did not come on right away; when they did they stayed on for about 10 minutes and then went out."

They described an image of students

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navigating their way to the exits in total darkness, with teachers trying their best to keep track of students under the conditions. The chaos continued as students made their way out into the rain and along the Lynn Fells Parkway and up Melrose Street.

To complicate things further, high school Principal Dr. Daniel Burke was at a conference in Lexington and vice principals Marianne Farrell and Robert Savarino lost communication with one another when their walkie talkies failed to work.

Despite the confusion all parties agreed that the students were able to get out of the building fairly quickly. Between the weather

and the dark, another factor was the new fire alarm. It stopped sounding prematurely when the generators died and could not be heard in certain parts of the school.

After the Fire Department arrived on the scene the building was deemed unsafe. The students were dismissed for the day and could not go back into the building to get their belongings. At that point Savarino (who was present at this week's School Committee meeting) said students were already calling their parents and many of them found shelter at the city's library and the Tremont Street YMCA. The YMCA reported the next day to Burke

that they had about 150 students who needed to use a phone that afternoon.

"We've never lost the lights so dramatically," said Burke, who sat before the School Committee. "The generator kicked in but didn't have enough juice to light the whole building."

The generator that failed was not a complete surprise. Director of Maintenance Joe Huggins had reported earlier in the year that it was on its last legs. There was discussion at previous school board meetings about possibly repairing or replacing it, but the issue was not addressed until now.

Schools' Business Manager

Barbara Quinlan reported that she in the process of getting quotes for a new generator and would know more by week's end.

According to Fire Chief O'Brien the explosion is still under investigation by OSHA (Occupation Safety and Health Administration). He noted that his department has been paying very close attention to the whole building site and they sweep the area several times a week.

Pat Saitta, president of Municipal Building Consultants, Inc., described the incident as a short circuit that occurred while an electrician was performing prep work to tie in the middle and high school electrical service.

High school students had no school the following day either due to the mishap.

According to the Director of Planning and Development Denise Gaffey, Griffin Electric has accepted responsibility for this accident and its costs, and mobilized its team quickly to correct the problem. They were able to get hold of an electrical panel even though it meant traveling to Connecticut and worked through the night to fix the problem. By 8 a.m. Thursday morning the power began to come back on and what was once going to be a temporary panel has now become permanent.

Deval Patrick talks school funding, all-day K at Lincoln

By LIZ JENNINGS

MELROSE — Democratic gubernatorial candidate Deval Patrick met with a group of 20 mothers at the Lincoln School on Friday, Sept. 29, to discuss education issues.

Both Patrick and the mothers were eager to share their thoughts on topics like all-day kindergarten, a longer school day and Chapter 70 funding from the state.

Patrick appeared ardent to learn about Melrose and find out what the real needs of community are; stating when he first arrived, "I want to listen to you."

Patrick started by talking about all-day kindergarten. The Melrose mothers said that they would like all-day kindergarten for all children but that it is very expensive. Patrick inquired about how long they have been paying for it and was told, "since all the grant money dried up."

If you live in Melrose you must pay \$2,175, the group disclosed. Patrick said, "Now that's real money," slightly taken aback at the expense that parents were assuming. The women added that though the all-day K tuition is high, it is the lowest in the area. The reason the group felt that all-day kindergarten is so important is because children

are more prepared for first grade.

One mother added the frustration of half day programs, where parents have to figure out a way to leave work, pick up their child, drop him off at daycare and then head back to work.

Another mother added, however, that the focus should be on what is best for the education of the child when talking about full day programs and not the inconvenience for parents.

The group then discussed the need for more Chapter 70 education funding from the Commonwealth. The mothers were frustrated that property taxes are going up but cities and towns are getting fewer and fewer services.

They explained that in Melrose, homeowners pay to have their trash removed and their water and sewer bills keep rising. And it doesn't help that Melrose has less than a 10 percent commercial tax base.

"We are not wealthy enough to manage Proposition 2 1/2 plus overrides, which routinely happen in other communities that can pay but we are not poor enough to get attention from the state. Communities that are poorer offer more services to students because they get more money. We are

pinched from all sides because Melrose looks too middle class on paper," said one mother.

There was a discussion about raising private funds to support education and it was revealed that the Melrose PTO raises money annually to help meet the budget. This year, for example, the PTO raised \$54,000. One mother laughed about the fundraisers, "We are all buying more wrapping paper than we need," adding that Melrose is a community that should be able to support its schools.

Parents also felt that the elementary school day was too short. This was not because parents wanted more learning time but because they wanted their children to have more time for things like recess and extracurricular activities or after school programs.

The mothers spoke to the lack of enrichment in the areas of art and music and the lack of field trips because of the expense.

They also noted the severe cut in play time. Last year students at the Lincoln School were only allowed one 10 minute recess; this year they have two 10 minute recesses but still the mothers felt that this is too short.

"Children won't have the skills that will lead them to other things like playing well together and later working well together. It is just as important as English and math," said one of the mothers.

Patrick agreed on this point, saying that education should be about the teaching of the whole child. He added that while he supports a longer school day he does not feel that more time means more learning time but rather adding enrichment and after school programs, continuing that these days some parents don't have the time to sit down with their children or take them to a museum and rely more heavily on the schools.

Patrick recognized that the Commonwealth is struggling with the state budget, emphasizing that

unfunded mandates are a problem.

"We need to restore funding and we have to look at the (Education Reform Law funding) formula because it doesn't pay for the actual cost of educating children," said Patrick.

He went on to say that things like Circuit Breakers to help fund special education needs to be funded 100 percent. He stated that charter schools are another unfunded mandate that cause a "corrosive dynamic between charter and public schools because both groups are competing over the same buck.

"The state has got to step up the level of Chapter 70 spending. It is a fiscal showdown today. Every time we roll back the income tax we pay for it with higher property taxes and fees. Pressures are put on things like whether you can keep faculties in schools to keep class sizes down and parents having to raise money to save positions," he said.