

The last one-room schoolhouse to operate in Illinois finds a new purpose after \$1.6M restoration

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McAuley School in West Chicago stands empty and fenced off on April 1, 2014. McAuley, which closed in 1991, had been the last operating one-room schoolhouse in Illinois. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

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A long-neglected, red frame building in West Chicago that was the final operating one-room schoolhouse in Illinois before its [closure in 1991](#) will have a new lease on life — along with a new purpose — once an ongoing \$1.6 million restoration concludes.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1982, the former McAuley School, at 1820 W. Roosevelt Road in West Chicago, [shut its doors](#) in 1991 after industrial development and an airport expansion in the surrounding area uprooted all its remaining pupils. McAuley always had been a single-building, elementary school district and, for decades, neighboring West Chicago Elementary School District 33 had coveted

the property tax-rich commercial land in the sparsely populated, 4-square-mile McAuley district, located some 32 miles west of downtown Chicago.

District 33's takeover of the McAuley district included a promise that the old schoolhouse was to be preserved and used for educational purposes. However, the district instead neglected the building for three decades.

Now, the 24-by-36-foot building is in the midst of a \$1.6 million, multiphase renovation by District 33 that includes a new roof, masonry restoration, improvements to deteriorated beams and floor joists, and utility upgrades, as well as a new parking lot. The schoolhouse will also get new doors, windows and siding. More than half the cost is being funded by a \$925,000 Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity grant.

When finished, the building, which sits on a 0.97-acre property, will be home to the district's instructional coaches, offering them a central location to support teaching and learning across all schools. District 33 also plans to use McAuley as a living educational resource, allowing pupils to come tour it and learn about the history of a one-room schoolhouse.

Rural origins

One-room schoolhouses once dotted America's rural landscapes, including in Illinois. Such schools, which were not partitioned by grade, were common in what now are Chicago's suburbs, many of which started as small farming communities. In 1935, Illinois Gov. Henry Horner recommended closing all one-room schoolhouses in the state and merging them with larger, adjoining districts. Over the next three decades, almost all followed suit and closed, including those in Chicago's rapidly densifying suburbs.

A Tribune article in June 1953 noted that 13 one-room schools — including McAuley — still were operating in DuPage County, and that several were headed for closure.

By 1966, however, just two one-room schoolhouses were operating in all of Illinois, the Tribune reported, and one of those was McAuley. Several years later, McAuley became the state's last one-room schoolhouse.

The McAuley school district began in 1853, when local farmer George McAuley — most of whose land now is owned by the Union Pacific Railroad, in part for its freight rail yards to the north — donated a small tract for a school along the wagon trail that would become Illinois Highway 38, or Roosevelt Road. Classes first were held in a log cabin, and then in a small shed.

The current school building was constructed in 1913, and for much of the 20th century, it chugged along with a fairly low enrollment. It had 13 pupils in first through sixth grades in 1966, and 27 students in 1970.

McAuley's small size, however, didn't mean that it was overlooked. Gazing longingly at McAuley's lucrative, heavily commercial property tax base, adjoining districts took interest. In 1972, a proposed merger of five area districts, including McAuley, ran aground. Meanwhile, development of surrounding farmland continued apace, and by 1982 the school had shrunk to just eight students.

By the late 1980s, McAuley's days [clearly were numbered](#), as the DuPage County Airport Authority, in the midst of a major expansion, began buying and razing most of the remaining homes in the McAuley district. By that point, McAuley also technically was no longer a one-room schoolhouse, as district leaders added two portable classrooms.



Children enjoy some freedom as they stack up on a slide during recess at McAuley School, a one-room school, on Oct. 12, 1977. (Hardy Wieting/Chicago Tribune)

McAuley's fate was sealed in 1991, when district leaders discovered that almost all of its students' families planned to move by that autumn. The two remaining students already were of junior high school age and were in the midst of attending middle school in neighboring districts as part of an agreement that McAuley leaders reached with District 33 in the late 1980s. That left McAuley with no pupils to educate, and the district actually

operated with zero students in the 1991-92 school year before District 33 formally absorbed it in 1992.

Most one-room schoolhouses fell by the wayside when lack of funds forced them to seek refuge in the arms of larger, neighboring districts. That was far from the case with McAuley, which in the 1960s was flush with cash in the form of property taxes from a nearby Western Electric parts plant. That factory provided the district with 70% of its tax support, according to a Tribune article at the time, while the adjoining railroad-owned land also produced significant tax receipts.



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In the ensuing decades after District 33 absorbed McAuley, the McAuley building deteriorated, with no significant maintenance done to it and no use other than for records and equipment storage.

Occasional proposals were floated by outside groups to use McAuley, though funding continually was a challenge. A 1992 plan to convert the building to a [Montessori school](#) fell apart due to heavy traffic on Roosevelt Road. In 2003, as district officials briefly considered selling the land to plug a budget gap, DuPage County Forest Preserve District officials mulled a grassroots plan to relocate the building to a forest preserve.

In 2014, the nonprofit preservationist group Landmarks Illinois placed McAuley on its list of 10 most endangered structures in Illinois and argued that the building should be moved into town and possibly repurposed as a residence.

A new chapter

In 2024, after procuring the state grant, District 33 began a restoration of the building with little fanfare. The work has proceeded deliberately, district officials say, because of the historic nature of the McAuley building.

“The pace of the project is intentionally guided by recommendations from the District 33 Facilities Committee, (architect) Arcon Associates, Landmarks Illinois and the Board of Education to ensure restoration decisions are made thoughtfully and responsibly rather than on a fixed construction timeline,” the district said in a statement.

At present, the building’s roof work is nearing completion, district spokesperson Nicole Eimer said.

In addition, the intended reuse of the building has changed. Earlier, District 33 had planned for the renovated McAuley to house its Birth to Three Parent Education and Community Center, which had been operating infant and child classes in rented space in various places in West Chicago.

However, Eimer said, as planning progressed, “we determined the building could not comfortably accommodate both staff offices and parent education programming. The Birth to Three Program has since relocated to a larger space next to the District 33 Educational Service Center at 300 E. Forest Avenue (in) West Chicago, where it can better serve families. McAuley will still be used for Birth to Three parent education and other educational and community purposes, while serving as the daily workspace for our district-wide instructional coaches.”

State Sen. Karina Villa, a West Chicago native and former school social worker in District 33 who later served as District 33’s board president, was responsible for procuring the \$925,000 grant to help fund the McAuley work. In an interview, she called

the old one-room schoolhouse “a source of pride for the West Chicago community (that) demonstrates the tremendous strides that our education has taken in the past century.”

“You think about the stories of your parents and grandparents who said how hard things were and how they had to walk to school for miles and maybe even attend school in a one-room schoolhouse,” she said. “And you might say, ‘Yeah, right, that never existed.’ But yes, we have this beautiful building that is being restored and people will be able to visualize that yeah, that really did happen for some people.”

Villa attributed the long-standing neglect of the McAuley building to historically challenged funding in District 33.

“District 33 is one of the most underfunded districts in the state, and ... the last thing we had the money for was to invest in a project like this,” she said. “The money I brought to District 33 (as a legislator), I first invested in playgrounds for all the schools, along with redesigning the entryways to help make them safer and then paying for new roofing for systems required for air conditioning. Once all these basic needs were kind of taken care of, I said, ‘Now, what’s one more dream?’ And at that point, it was time to look at McAuley School.”