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## School rebuilds learning curve

**Hope: Once-struggling Westport is beginning to show signs of a major rebound.**

September 21, 2001 | By Liz Bowie | Liz Bowie, SUN STAFF

The concrete front steps of the once impressive brick school were crumbling. The grounds were trampled, the children undisciplined and the 25-year-old carpet inside too far gone to clean.

For years, Westport Elementary-Middle School's building decayed and its low test scores stagnated, until last March when state education leaders chose it from a list of 96 failing schools in Maryland as the one most in need of a takeover.

By the time pupils returned on Sept. 4, the city had completed \$300,000 worth of building renovations, including painting the outside trim a cheerful butter cream and putting down shiny floor tiles inside.

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"It has been a real transformation here," said Marjorie Miles, a former city school administrator who is now helping to manage the southern Baltimore school. "It is like going from an ugly duckling to a beautiful swan."

More than just the building has changed since the city schools signed a \$4 million contract with New York-based Victory Schools Inc. to manage Westport, negotiating their way around what would have been a full state takeover of the school.

Victory has instituted stricter discipline in the halls, parents say, and rehired only about half the staff. Forty percent of the elementary teachers and 80 percent of the middle school teachers are new to the school.

About 90 percent of its teachers are certified - they have passed the teaching exam and have taken the required courses - a rate higher than in most city elementary schools.

But Victory didn't do the total overhaul that is typical in other takeovers around the nation. It kept the principal, Ernestine Lewis, who had arrived two years before. And it kept the curriculum largely the same.

The school, renamed Westport Academy by Victory, has been able to attract some teaching veterans from within the system, including social studies teacher Edgar T. Smith, who has 12 years' experience in city schools.

Smith was teaching third- and fifth-graders at Holabird Elementary and decided to apply to teach fifth- and sixth-graders. "I love it. I absolutely love it," Smith said. He said his pupils seem eager and motivated. "I've had them say they enjoy the teachers, and they like the way the building looks," he said.

Some parents were at first wary about the takeover.

"Many parents wanted change, but they wanted input in the change," Miles said. "At first, there were a lot of questions, a lot of concerns about what was going to happen."

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