Library in new Back of the Yards H.S. to be open to public
By Fran Spielman
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Chicago’s new Back of the Yards High School will be devoted exclusively to the rigorous International Baccalaureate diploma program tailor-made to prepare students for college and house a new community library that will be open to the public. The new library inside the high school — scheduled to open in 2013 — marks the start of what could be a groundbreaking partnership between the Chicago Public Schools and a public library system that absorbed 50 percent of the layoffs in Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s first budget.

The library cuts were so great, they prompted the January resignation of longtime Library Commissioner Mary Dempsey.

The community library will have its own entrance, teen-only space and public reading garden. It will be open six days a week and staffed during school hours by city librarians working alongside a full-time, CPS teacher librarian responsible for ensuring that the library collection meets the needs of the IB curriculum.

By pooling diminishing resources, CPS and City Hall will be able to offer “teen-focused collections and digital learning amenities,” officials said, and still operate a public library for all Back of the Yards residents, who lost their storefront library to flooding last year.

“It will serve the high school and it will serve the community. That’s a totally different way of thinking about what has been until this point, a silo-ed approach serving the same people,” Emanuel told a news conference Tuesday in the library of Cesar Chavez Elementary, 4747 S. Marshfield. “I consider this a great idea, an innovative idea. We’ve traditionally silo-ed the Chicago Public Libraries from the Chicago Public Schools. We’ve brought them together because our mission is the same: teaching our children, serving as a community center for our families and our children.”

Schools have high security to protect students, including surveillance cameras, metal detectors, police officers, security guards and visitor badges. Libraries are open to everybody.

How will the Back of the Yards High School prevent library patrons from gaining access to the school?

“That’s an engineering issue and that’s easily accomplished ... to make sure that community members don’t have access to the school,” the mayor said.

Newly-appointed Library Commissioner Brian Bannon said he’s working with the Public Building Commission to design the new library with security in mind.
“We’re looking at a variety of security measures we can take in the building that would be similar to what the schools currently use to ensure safety,” Bannon said, noting that the public library-in-a-school model already “exists in cities all over the country.”

For months, Emanuel has been striving to provide high-caliber high school choices to stop middle-class families from fleeing to the suburbs.

In late February, the mayor disclosed that five technology giants would join forces with CPS and City Colleges to offer a six-year program that would allow high school students to graduate with an associate’s degree and have the skills needed for jobs in the high-tech sector.

The following month, he announced plans to double the size of the city’s international baccalaureate program and devote five neighborhood schools exclusively to that program to prepare 3,500 more students for college.

The mayor subsequently announced that DePaul would join forces with Microsoft to help Lake View High School make the conversion to one of five so-called STEM high schools specializing in science, technology, engineering and math and that Loyola University would help Senn High School make the leap to one of five IB-only high schools tailor-made to prepare students for college.

Back of the Yards High School will now become the second of the five, “wall to wall” IB neighborhood high schools. The school is scheduled to in the fall of 2013 at 2111 West 47th Street with space for 1,200 students.

Schools CEO Jean-Claude Brizard stressed that the school would be “neighborhood first, open enrollment.”

“We look for students who are interested in being part of this rigorous environment. So, no testing to get in,” Brizard said.

Chicago built 59 new libraries during the 22-year reign of former Mayor Richard M. Daley.

The decision to open a community library inside a public high school is a clear signal that the library building binge is over.