

GETTING PHYSICAL ABOUT EDUCATION

by **Ellen Kollie**

This unique playground initiative is giving Denver Public Schools' elementary children a place to learn and play, building neighborhood pride, and providing graduation credits, AmeriCorps Campus Compact tuition vouchers, and experience to University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center graduate students.

From Lois A. Brink's perspective, in 1998, her idea for a pilot project to reinvigorate Denver Public Schools' (DPS) elementary school yards was propelled forward by two mandates. The first was that federally mandated bussing in Denver was eliminated, meaning that DPS schools were once again true neighborhood schools. The second was that her employer, the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center (UCDHSC), mandated service learning as part of an urban university philosophy.

The associate professor of Landscape Architecture came up with a plan whereby the graduate students in UCDHSC's College of Architecture and Planning would plan and design new playgrounds for DPS' elementary schools. All of the playgrounds needed updating as they were stocked with deteriorated or no playground equipment on either pea gravel or scorched earth.

"The situation was chronic throughout the city, regardless of the economic or cultural backgrounds of the neighborhoods," Brink says. That shouldn't come as a surprise in a district with 75,000 students where the average age of the facilities is 50.

The pilot project would be Bromwell Elementary, which her own children attended. "I was helping my children's school," Brink says. "And I was involving my graduate students in critical site planning, community health and sustainability issues. From my perspective, there was a lot of value in both."

Off the Ground

The school district was excited about the idea. So was the city. A \$1-million grant from the city for redeveloping seven inner-city schools in underprivileged neighborhoods launched the project.

The Learning Landscape Alliance (LLA), an entrepreneurial public/private partnership, was formed. It was spearheaded by Brink, Tom Kaesemeyer of the Gates Family Foundation and Michael C. Langley, executive director of Facility Management for Denver Public Schools.

The partnership developed a strategic master plan and vision. "Nobody was happy with the condition of our elementary playgrounds, such as they were," says Langley. "A lot of people wanted to do something, but no one knew what. We knew that, if we had a master plan and vision, we could solicit funds and build to that — one learning landscape at a time."

The LLA identified the mayor's 16 focus neighborhoods in the inner city of Denver as being the most underserved and most needy of capital improvement projects. "Our charge," says Brink, "was to take three years, raise money, design and construct 22 learning landscapes in these 16 underprivileged neighborhoods. We raised \$10.6 million and built them."

"The have-nots got learning landscapes well before the haves did," Langley notes.

The success of the project became the catalyst for a general obligation bond. In 2003, the district was going to the voters with a \$300-million bond. Just \$10 million of that was earmarked for additional learning landscapes. "When the citizens advisory committee met with the district to determine what should be in the bond," Brink says, "the learning landscapes ranked number two! This project had value to everybody in the district because it crossed all economic, social and cultural boundaries." The bond successfully passed, and 36 more learning landscapes were put on the drawing board.

Up and Running

Brink's UCDHSC students are offered three courses that give them credit toward graduation, valuable hands-on experience and AmeriCorps Campus Compact tuition vouchers while, at the same time, advancing the completion of the learning landscapes. Those classes include master planning (creating a schoolwide campus plan), design/development and design/build.

"In terms of landscape architecture," says Brink, "what's been important is that my students have been able to take the time to do research, explore and advance what playgrounds should be like in terms of construction materials and what a baseline should be for this environment. We have practitioners who do the final drawings, and Mike Langley tells them that they have to respect what the students create. That has helped advance the landscape discipline and the value of the learning landscapes."

Each learning landscape is different, yet they all have similar components, including developmentally appropriate play equipment, cultivated or environmental gardens, grass, shade structures and entry gates. "We are including educational elements that can be experiential or prescribed as part of the curriculum," Brink explains. "We look at addressing physical education, academic education and socialization."

The learning landscapes also include art elements, completed by the students and/or local artists. One learning landscape may include decorative ceramic tiles on play tables, while another may incorporate banners hung from poles — both created by students in art class. "They're not just playgrounds; they're learning landscapes," stresses Langley.

To minimize costs, the landscapes are assembled by volunteer labor. Volunteers erected some of the equipment, laid sod and more. "We found out this was a positive activity in that it brought parents and the community back to the school, like an old-fashioned barn raising," says Langley.

Proving It Works

The project is far enough along that Brink has started conducting applied research to validate and demonstrate the merits of the program. A \$250,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is specifically allowing her to do quantitative research on increases in physical activity in school-age children and their adjacent communities.

The preliminary findings are not surprising. First, teachers report that the children are more attentive when they come back into the classroom after having been outside in the learning landscapes. Second, there have been reductions in principal referrals at many of the schools. This is because the children now have educational and attractive ways in which to expend their energy, as opposed to wandering aimlessly around the scorched earth with nothing constructive to do.

Finally, vandalism to the schools themselves has been reduced. This is common when a neighborhood takes pride in its appearance.

Additional Components

Brink also is working toward a critical component: teaching the communities how to care for their learning landscapes. "You can't do \$500,000 of improvement in an inner city neighborhood and expect that neighborhood to know how to take care of it or expect the district to have the funds to take care of it," she explains.

To that end, a technical assistance program has been started that's funded by the university and the Gates Family Foundation to teach people how to sustain the projects. "Everybody knows what Field Day is," continues Brink. "I want a Clean Up the Playground Day. It's part of the American culture of what you do at your school. This is the whole idea of stewardship."

Another element that's in the planning stages is physical education curriculum. Brink notes that they're working with other health organizations on putting this together.

The Denver Schoolyard Consortium is yet another project component. "It consists of approximately 25 organizations that are interested in participating in some way, shape or form in using the learning landscapes to educate the teachers, children and communities," Brink explains. Some of those organizations are the National Wildlife Federation, EarthForce and Denver Urban Garden.

And Brink candidly confesses that, at this time, the least successful piece of the program is the traditional academic curriculum component. "We are searching for grants to create a summer institute where teachers can get their teaching credits for learning ways to incorporate the learning landscapes into their curriculum," she says. "We also have to work toward teacher buy-in. However, it will be an important program element once it's up and running."

One More Step

Today, Brink hopes that DPS moves forward with a 2006 general obligation bond (the 2003 bond was split in half), which offers the potential to build 36 more learning landscapes and would mean that each of the district's elementary schools would have a learning landscape.

When that happens, rather than put away her notes, Brink plans to take the program to another district.

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