

Redesigning Schoolyards at Two Schools: A Summary of the Seven Design Phases

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About the Playful Learning Schoolyard Redesign Program

In spring 2019, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), in partnership with Mural Arts Philadelphia, was awarded a grant from the William Penn Foundation to redesign schoolyards at three elementary schools into “playful learning areas.” Playful learning areas are not just playgrounds. Instead, these areas are environments designed for children that encourage and reinforce learning outside of the classroom.

Two schools were selected by SDP in spring 2019 to participate in the redesign process from eight schools that were invited to interview. Schools were invited to interview if they had already received renovated PK-3 classrooms as part of a previous literacy initiative. The goal was to expand the previous investments in PK-3 literacy learning by extending the literacy-rich environments to the schoolyard. The two schools that are part of this round of the schoolyard redesign initiative were selected based on staff and community engagement and on readiness of the physical site to easily be redesigned into a playful learning schoolyard. After schools are selected, Mural Arts engages the school community in a year-long collaborative design process for the schoolyard.

The redesign will happen in two rounds, with two schools (Joseph Pennell School and Louis H. Farrell School) receiving a schoolyard redesign during the 2020-21 school year and one school (to be determined) receiving the redesign in 2021-22. This memo summarizes the design process that took place during the 2019-20 school year at Pennell and Farrell Schools based on observations conducted by the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE).¹

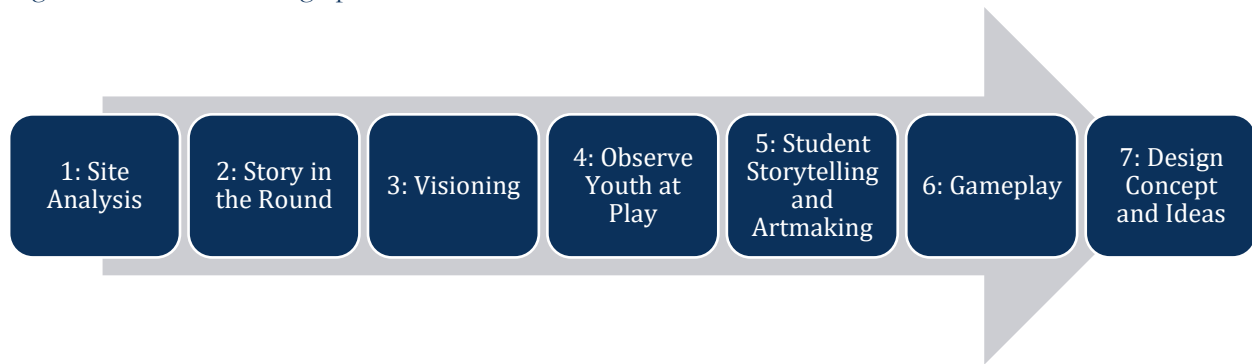
Design Process

There were seven main phases to the design process for each school that took place between September 2019 and January 2020: Site Analysis, Story in the Round, Visioning, Observe Youth at Play, Student Storytelling and Artmaking, Gameplay, and Design Concept and Ideas (Figure 1). While the overall framework was the same at both Pennell and Farrell during the 2019-20 school

¹ ORE observed twelve events, eight at Pennell (Site Analysis, Story in the Round, Student Storytelling and Artmaking, Gameplay with students, Gameplay with parents, and three Design Concept and Ideas sessions) and four at Farrell (two rounds of Student Storytelling and Artmaking, Gameplay with students, and Gameplay with parents).

year, the design process at each school evolved slightly differently depending on input from staff, students, parents, and the community. Mural Arts led the design phases, in partnership with the landscape architecture firm hired by SDP.² The phases were an iterative process of collecting stories about what was important for the school community to have in their redesigned schoolyard.

Figure 1. Timeline of design process



Site Analysis

The first step in the site analysis phase was for students to take pictures of spaces or things in the current schoolyard that they liked or did not like. The Mural Arts staff explained that the purpose of this was to start a conversation about what students think is important to have in their schoolyard and to understand how students currently use the space. One classroom of students at each school (fifth-grade students at Pennell and eighth-grade students at Farrell) were given Polaroid cameras to take pictures. Mural Arts staff advised students on how to hold the camera and how to frame their shot to tell the story they wanted. Each student had an opportunity to take at least one picture.

After collecting pictures, the students returned to their classroom. The Mural Arts facilitator placed a map of the current schoolyard area on the classroom wall and asked students to tape their picture in the corresponding area on the printout. Students then told their fellow students what the picture was of and why they took it. Examples of student responses at Pennell included moving the dumpster elsewhere, adding shade, creating a “cool privacy chill spot,” making a creative spot where students can hang out with friends, having a dance spot where “you can dance and not get in trouble,” and keeping the plants and trees because that looks like a spot “where you can calm yourself down.” After each student shared their feedback, the Mural Arts facilitator took a picture of the entire map with pictures attached to inform the next phases of the process.

Story in the Round

The purpose of this second phase was to identify themes that were important to the school community. The themes that were identified then informed the creation of the game used in phase six of the design process. The parent session at Pennell had 24 participants. Farrell scheduled storytelling with parents and staff to coincide with their Back to School Night and had 67

² The design firm was selected through a Request for Proposal solicitation to be one of five Civil Engineering or Landscape Architecture firms under an Indefinite Demand Indefinite Quantity Contract with SDP.

participants. At Pennell, a social worker/therapist led parents through several iterations of a drum circle (a similar process occurred at Farrell but ORE was unable to observe it). As an introduction round, each parent stated their name and one thing they like about themselves. During the first story round, the social worker started a story about a fictional girl named Erika and then each parent could add to the story when it was their turn, with a repeated refrain of “everybody has a story.” Some of the themes brought up were academic success and excitement about a new schoolyard. After a short reflection, the social worker then walked participants through the Core Elements of Literacy (six Cs): collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence.³ He talked about why each is important and how it connects to the schoolyard. The social worker then asked participants to talk about which of the six Cs resonated with them. Then the participants did a second round of storytelling, this time about a fictional student named Bobby C. During the last reflection, Mural Arts staff prompted parents to choose which C most resonated with them, with communication being the most popular. Towards the end of the activity, parents started talking about schoolyard safety instead of the Bobby C story. Parents seemed unclear about how the activity fit into the design process. They may have attended the session with the understanding this would be a chance to raise concerns, including safety concerns with opening the space up to the community. Mural Arts staff assured parents that they would have an opportunity later to share these concerns, and the social worker guided parents back to the activity and to reflection about the six Cs.

Visioning

During Visioning sessions, participating parents and students (8th graders at Farrell) filled out a “Postcard from the Future” (a 5”x7” cardstock with a picture of each school on the front) to identify their dreams for the schoolyard space. Mural Arts staff then facilitated discussions with each school community around the submissions until they reached consensus by agreeing on a vision statement. During the visioning that ORE observed, each parent was given two votes to assign to the postcard statement that the participant found to be the most important.

Each school had a final vision statement that influenced the design concept. Pennell had two, which were “A safe, colorful, vibrant, and educational space that fosters both structured and spontaneous play and nourishes children to use their creative minds” and “A loving, positive space with flowers and trees, where we can come together as a family and support and look out for one another.”

Farrell’s vision statement was “The schoolyard is a safe, fun, green space:

... that is quiet and shady, where kids can be and feel comfortable, welcome and make new friends.

... with equal amounts of big spaces for active use and quiet spaces and for both individuals and groups so everyone has a place to play, hang out, relax and enjoy their time ... that is a colorful, magical space that inspires imagination

... that celebrates cultural diversity, and inspires and has capacity for family rituals and traditions.”

³ The six Cs were developed from early childhood education research. For more information, see <https://kathyhirshpasek.com/early-childhood-education/>.

Observe Youth at Play

Mural Arts contracted with an education and play expert to observe students using the current schoolyard during recess and after school. The goal was to understand how students currently play and use the space. ORE did not observe this phase of the process.

Student Storytelling and Artmaking

The storytelling phase with students was conducted in first-, second-, and third-grade classrooms by a team from Mural Arts. Community Design Leaders (parents from each school hired by Mural Arts to support the design process) were also present to assist students. Two classrooms participated from each school (at Pennell, a first-grade and second-grade classroom; at Farrell, a first-grade and third-grade classroom). The goal of the student sessions was for students to create a visual representation of their story. Storytelling included two rounds held on separate days. Each storytelling round started with a warm-up activity. During the first round, the Mural Arts team introduced themselves and instructed students to make a self-portrait using markers, pieces of paper, and glue/tape. This was intended to be a short, 10-minute activity to get students used to using the materials before the main activity.

Then the teachers read books or stories to students. The staff at each school decided which stories to read. At Farrell, all the classes read *The Recess Queen*. This book describes a story about a playground bully and a new child who comes to the school. Eventually, the bully and the new child become friends and the other students realize that the bully just needed a friend, a point the teachers emphasized at the end of the story. At Pennell, each teacher told a story about a memory from their own life. For example, one teacher told a story about raking leaves with her brother as a child and then jumping in the pile. After her dad also jumped in, they went inside the house and their mom made s'mores, which they ate on the porch.

After the teachers read or told a story, Mural Arts staff instructed the students to choose a scene, moment, or character from the story that they liked or did not like to draw using the provided art supplies. Before drawing, students were encouraged to take turns at their table sharing their choice of scene in order to avoid having duplicates at the same table. Adults helped students by asking them what parts of the story they wanted to draw, making sure that students were on track, and making sure that everyone had an idea. Children were also encouraged to make the scene their own instead of copying it from the story. At the end of the activity, the adults helped students write their name and a caption at the bottom of the picture that explained what they drew. Mural Arts staff collected the pictures to make electronic copies that would be printed as game pieces for the next design phase. They promised to return the pictures to students after they had a chance to scan them into their files. Some examples of what students drew for *The Recess Queen* were a jump rope, the school yard, "when she was really happy," "when they shared," and "when they played together."

The second round of storytelling (which took place a week later) was similar, except that each table of students had a different book read to them. These books had less of a narrative structure and were more descriptive (for example, sports, colors, dancing, and nature). Students could choose to

draw an object from the books or a picture of a time they used one of the objects. Examples of pictures from one of the nature books included a hole, rain, climbing a tree, and a worm. Examples from the sports book included soccer, basketball, cheerleading, and football. Mural Arts staff explained to ORE that the books were selected to represent a range of objects and actions (such as a soccer ball or gardening) that would be useful as playing cards during the next phase of planning: playing the game. Students shared out what they drew, first with their table and then with the whole group.

Gameplay

The sixth phase of the design process was Gameplay. In this phase (which took place in November 2019), Mural Arts staff used the pictures drawn by children in phase two to create pieces for a game that they played separately with staff, students, and families. The parent sessions each had between 9-14 participants and the game was played with several classrooms at each school. The purpose of the game was to further refine the themes that arose during the previous phases.

The game board was an image of the schoolyard with the school building and surrounding streets. Participants separated into groups, and each team had a “story lab” (a piece of cardstock printed with a honeycomb), a die, and a stack of cards with student drawings. On the other side of the pictures on the game pieces was the caption that went along with the student drawing. In each group, participants rolled the die to pick a series of cards and used them to tell a story. For example, if the die landed on blue, participants would pick a card from the blue pile which contained drawings of action items. Red cards had characters, green had environment/places, pink had describers (e.g., unique, colorful), and if the team rolled yellow, they could pick from any category. The cards were placed in spots on the story lab as they were picked, and the group came up with a story, using the prompts on the cards, that they could imagine taking place in the schoolyard. Then the group came back together and each read the story out loud to all participants. Mural Arts staff asked each group to read the story a second time so they could record it, and then the team placed the story lab on the game board in the location where they could imagine it taking place. Students could create a story on any topic using the selected cards. For parents, Mural Arts staff gave them themes that had come out of the storytelling process to center their stories around. At Farrell, parents used collaborating, creative innovation, gardening, and play. An example story from the parents at Farrell was, “Friends get together in the garden full of leaves and butterflies around the tree. Baby birds were amazed at all the plants growing in the plant beds.”

Design Concept and Ideas

The seventh phase of the design process was Design Concept and Ideas. Mural Arts staff reviewed the process with the parent, student, or staff attendees, shared their findings, and introduced participants to staff from the landscape architecture firm. There were two sessions at each school, one geared more towards parents and staff and one towards students. The parent/staff sessions had between 14-18 attendees and the student sessions involved several classrooms of students in a large space such as an auditorium. These sessions started with a presentation summarizing what

Mural Arts had done up to that point and shared the major themes they discovered in their work and the concept that would lead the design of the schoolyard.

For example, at Pennell, the major themes were nature, creative space, relaxing, and family traditions, which led to a design concept of “Circles of creativity and care.” Mural Arts shared,

Circles represent wholeness, cycles, community, connection, and care. From support circles, giving circles, and sister circles, to movement circles, and healing circles, the common use of “circle” more often denotes community and collectivism than a shape.

The form of the circle, a hug or huddle when embodied, emboldens us to look inward and inspect its central, focal point. The circle simultaneously promotes introspection and expands our networks of creativity and care.

The design adopts the form of the circle to find the form through which Pennell School outdoor space is taking shape.

The design concept at Farrell was “A living place where life takes place!”, incorporating a beehive shape. Mural Arts described it further as,

A place is a spatial field that gathers, activates, sustains, identifies, and interconnects things, human beings, experiences, meanings, and events.

The design adopts the metaphor of the beehive to find the form through which Farrell School outdoor space is taking shape.

The beehive is just as alive as the bees they house. As bees pollinate and thus regenerate our ecosystems, the beehive plays an active role in gathering, sustaining, interconnecting and activating life.

Mural Arts staff showed a diagram of the existing site, then showed the concept diagram for the redesign and how they mapped the themes that came up during the process onto the site. Next was another storytelling opportunity; at the session with Pennell students, the same social worker from the Story in the Round phase told a poem he wrote inspired by the stories from the community. He also told a story about students who moved into the Pennell neighborhood and were welcomed by their new neighbors. Finally, the team from the landscape architecture firm introduced themselves and shared some before and after pictures of previous projects.

Lastly, the landscape architecture firm hosted sessions as an opportunity to get further input on their designs. Students, staff, and parents were invited to attend. At Pennell’s session, there were about five parents and about 17 students (representatives from each grade). At each school site, the landscape architects reviewed the overall theme for the schoolyard and their plan for the space. Participants then split into small groups and wrote down their suggestions and concerns on sticky

notes about the design that the landscape architecture firm presented. The landscape architecture firm's team then had participants place their sticky note on a large poster showing the schoolyard redesign. At Pennell, the adult participants shared many concerns about the dumpster placement. Some of the suggestions from students included adding a microphone, play house, food cart, volleyball space, go-karts, climbing equipment, and growing a garden to use the vegetables for salads during school lunch.

Conclusion

There were seven main phases to the design process for each school during the 2019-20 school year: Site Analysis, Story in the Round, Visioning, Observe Youth at Play, Student Storytelling and Artmaking, Gameplay, and Design Concept and Ideas. These phases sought input from staff, students, parents, and the community on the schoolyard redesigns. Mural Arts led the sessions in partnership with the landscape architecture firm hired by SDP. ORE will continue to observe schoolyard redesign activities over the next three years.