

SCES and SSIMS Outdoor Classroom Planning Charette Summary

February 28, 2012

The Sligo Creek PTA hosted an information session and gathered input from nearly 40 people on creating an outdoor classroom in a planning “charette” on February 28, 2012. Attendees included Sligo Creek Elementary School (SCES) and Silver Spring International Middle School (SSIMS) children, parents and the SSIMS principal, Mr. Haas. SCES/SSIMS are fortunate to share a large interior courtyard between the schools. This meeting was the first of its kind for this community to gather information from teachers, parents, children and school administration to inform the development and design of an outdoor classroom in the shared courtyard.

The meeting began with some background on the project. A group of parents began working on the idea in the fall of 2011. The shared courtyard is underused, yet has a lot of potential to connect children with the outdoors and provide an alternate location and method for instruction of the current curriculum. The outdoor classroom can be used for many subject areas, from math and science to literacy, social studies, music, art, and drama.

The Outdoor Classroom Committee wanted to provide an open forum to discuss the outdoor classroom and to collect ideas from across the schools, so it decided to host a charette. A “charette” is a collaborative workshop that brings together key stakeholders to address a specific design issue. The Committee invited veteran landscape designer, Beth Ginter of the Honeybee Group, to facilitate the meeting. Beth specializes in children’s spaces – particularly in schoolyards - and she shared some of her experience about the benefits of outdoor classrooms and potential features.

The presentation continued with information on why an outdoor classroom is important. Many children have lost a connection to the environment, and children in general spend 50% less time outside than their parents. Serious childhood health concerns may be ameliorated by time spent outdoors, and educators strive for more innovative approaches to practical, hands-on learning. Here in Maryland, the Board of Education approved environmental literacy standards in 2010 and the Montgomery County Council of PTAs adopted a resolution to support edible gardens in 2011.

Some features of successful schoolyard learning programs:

- Clear tie-ins to curriculum
- Ownership by the entire community
- Careful planning for maintenance
- Outdoor classroom space
- Wildlife connections
- Gardening
- Scientific observation
- Environmental stewardship
- Creative opportunities

Potential elements for an outdoor classroom include the following:

- Places to sit down (benches, rocks, stumps)
- Access to wildlife (bird blind, butterfly garden)
- Container gardens
- Understanding native habitats – (ponds where kids can touch the water)
- Weather observation and recording –
- Human sundial
- Using rainwater on site – rain barrel, dry stream barrels
- Experience art outdoors – every subject can be taught outdoors
- Composting – can study natural process of decomposition
- Water features

We can draw inspiration from some local schools. Tuckahoe Elementary School has had a very successful outdoor learning program for 15 years. They have an interior courtyard that represents the different zones of Virginia, using native species from each of these zones. An outdoor learning coordinator can give a tour of the outdoor classroom any time. Another inspiration is Judith Resnick Elementary School here in Montgomery County. They have ponds, raised garden beds and an arbor to provide shade and habitat for nesting species. Our volunteers have visited these schools and are learning from their experiences.

Following the presentation, the participants broke into small groups, each with a scaled map of the courtyard space. Each group put pen to paper to design their own outdoor classrooms. This exercise allowed everyone to think about how to use the space and include their favorite classroom elements. The result was seven different designs that included nearly 80 elements – all of which had a lot in common.

At the end of the evening, each group presented their design and ideas to everyone. A bird feeder, compost area, and pond or water feature all tied for the top ranked elements. A close second tier included a butterfly garden, outdoor chalkboard, edible plants, stage, human sundial, and weather station. In addition to the features that were highlighted, the groups identified important considerations for designing the outdoor classroom. Appendices 1, 2, and 3 show all the features identified by participants, how they were prioritized, and the considerations identified by charette participants.

The meeting concluded with a big thank you to participants and our facilitator. The Outdoor Classroom Committee invites anyone who is interested to join the committee or participate in whatever way they are able. The next steps include discussions with teachers at both schools, the PTA of both schools, and other related committees and groups. We want to be open, inclusive, and thorough as we move ahead with plans for the outdoor classroom. We welcome your input!

Attendees included Laurel Bahar, Sarah Ball, Debbie Boger, Caroline Clements, Eric Clements, Wiley Clements, Kelley Craig, Annemarie Ewing, Emanuelle Hair, Tori Hall, Stephanie Hartman, Cathy Hilton-Russo, Tami Grosko, John Haas, Diane Kelleher, Amy Kenney, Mi Ae Kim, Robert Kronenberg, Angie Kronenberg, Jenna Kronenberg, Wesley Kronenberg, Kim McLean, Stephanie Montgomery, Patrick Naehu, Margy O'Herron, Steve Pierce, Crystal Pleasants, Wyndy Rausenberger, Caitlin Simpson, Elise Stigliano, Jen Troke, Margaret Upton, Cori Vanchieri, Whitney Warren.

Appendix 1: Outdoor Classroom Features Identified During Charette

- Aesthetically pleasing
- Amphitheatre
- Arbor
- Art
 - handprint mosaic
- Awning for rainy day observation
- Bat house
- Bird feeder
 - Blind for birding
- Bridge
- Butterfly garden
- Cartoon area for art
- Chalkboard
- Classroom seating
 - Seating in shady spot
 - circular seating
- Compost bin/area
- Construction area
- Create zone
- Dedicated grade level areas
- Desks for writing/eating
- different textures
- Dry stream
- Energy generation: solar panel/wind turbine
- Flexible space
- Flowerbeds
- Garden
 - berries
 - edible plants
 - bushes
 - fruit trees
 - raised beds
 - shade perennials
 - sunny perennials
- Greenhouse
- Landscaping
 - flowers
 - grasses
 - new tree for shade over seating
- Messy area
- Murals showing MD regions
- Music center
- Native plants
- Natural slate to paint
- New access from SCES
- Pergola (with vines)
- Permeable circular pathway
- Pond/water feature
 - fish
 - turtles
- Quiet area
- Rain barrel
- Rain garden
- Remove pavement
- Salamanders/habitat
- Sculpture garden
- Shed
- Sitting area
 - rock sitting area
- Something for every season
- Sound barrier
 - with water
 - Sound: bushes/fence
- Stage
 - elevated stage
- Stream heading to pond
- Sundial
- Trellis
- Vertical pipes for music
- Vertical garden
- Vines in pots growing up fence/generator
- Visual barrier for HVAC
- Water feature
- Weather station
- Wind chimes
- Zen rock garden
- Signs identifying plants/features

Appendix 2: Outdoor Classroom Features by Rank

Rank was determined by the frequency each feature was used by groups in their design. Features are only included if they were identified by more than one group. The complete list of features is included in Appendix 1.

Features	Rank
Bird feeder	1
Compost bin/area	1
Pond/water feature	1
Butterfly garden	2
Chalkboard	2
edible plants	2
Stage	2
Sundial	2
Weather station	2
Amphitheatre	3
Classroom seating	3
Rain barrel	3
Arbor	4
Bat house	4
Blind for birding	4
Bridge	4
Create zone	4
Dedicated grade level areas	4
Flowerbeds	4
Garden	4
fruit trees	4
raised beds	4
Landscaping	4
flowers	4
grasses	4
Native plants	4
New access from SCES	4
Pergola (with vines)	4
Rain garden	4
Shed	4
Trellis	4
Water feature	4

Appendix 3: Considerations Identified During the Outdoor Classroom Charette

- Maintenance
- The existing plywood stage will soon be removed because of safety concerns
- Scheduling time to use the outdoor classroom (SCES and SSIMS)
- Existing trees will stay
- Sidewalks don't have to stay, but may be difficult to remove
- Noise from outdoor classroom if windows open in the building
- Accessibility so everyone can use and enjoy the space
- Access to the courtyard.
- Drainage – lots of water flows through the courtyard as runoff
- The top of the hill may have more usable space because of the air handlers
- This is MCPS property
- Use broken concrete as stepping stones
- Visual distractions – seeing in or out of windows
- Something to cover up noise and sight of air handler (Sound barrier)
- Areas for multiple groups to use space concurrently
- Use shrubs/material to block noise
- Use features to transition between spaces (bridges, trellis, etc.)
- Telescopes to look at birds
- Signs around courtyard to identify things.
- A plant-y walkway
- Stones on water that you can sit on and take notes
- Animals (fish, turtles, frogs, snails, lily)
- Planting trees
- Have at least two seating areas to accommodate multiple groups
- Seating – stumps, carpet squares, tree logs, rocks, benches, tree stumps)
- Summer maintenance (options for help summer school, French camp, community center, Rockville Daycare)
- No beehives – too many allergies
- Remove low limbs to make room and usable space underneath mature trees.
- We need better access point from Sligo Creek ES
- Pergola as shade to cover seating area
- Soften lines – current paths too geometric
- Get rid of path to nowhere (take out concrete)
- Include features and plantings for every season.
- Aesthetically pleasing
- Tactile features/different textures
- Sixth grade Shakespeare theatre
- Give all teachers a key to courtyard
- Places for kids to hide
- Hidden camera in bat box
- Awning to provide shady spot/rainy day cover
- Use pergola to create transition
- Murals representing MD habitats and animals that are typical
- Replace picnic tables – they are rotting
- Concerns about bugs
- Noise disturbing other classes
- Pond would be neat for science experiments and art accessibilities

Middle School Desires:

- Make sure space is not just geared toward elementary school
- Place to sit with desk for writing or eating
- Hydroponics unit (related to greenhouse)
- Plant studies (white turtlehead plants)
- Bug study
- Drama
- Language classes for vocabulary
- Outside is a good place to go outside and concentrate on reading
- LCL filming (Lights, Camera, Literacy?)