

green schoolyards

FOR HEALTHY
COMMUNITIES



Photo: Craig Johnson

CASE STUDY: Philadelphia Community Schools Nature Habitat Gardens

GOALS:

- > Adapt and inform more integrated, healthy, and effective ways of imagining landscapes as habitats and school grounds as living ecosystems; and
- > Serve the health and well-being of human children as well as those of all species.

Communities benefit when school grounds are designed as living habitats for play and learning.



OVERVIEW

The Mayor's Office of Education in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania launched a Community School Initiative in 2016. Community schools serve both as an educational hub for students, and as a hub for broader community services. They provide a place for the community to access social events, food, benefits, legal support, and adult education. Twelve schools out of 220 schools in Philadelphia are community schools.

One such community school, William Cramp Elementary, is a K-5 school that now features a green school ground and demonstrates how green school grounds could be a core program for other community schools. William Cramp Elementary is located in an under-resourced neighborhood with many challenges.

Interpret Green designed, developed and evolved this prototyped nature habitat learning environment over two-and-a-half

years and continues to collaborate with many city and non-profit organizations. The project was awarded top honors by the Delaware Valley Green Building Council.

THE WORK

The work involves design or re-design of school grounds so that they are living habitats for play and learning. They are used by educators during the school day, and by community members and resource people for afterschool programs. The green school grounds are intentionally organized into three physical areas: **1) Nature Play in recreational areas; 2) Hands-on Horticulture in garden areas; and 3) Nature Habitat Learning Landscapes in all other areas of the school grounds.** The grounds include wildlife habitats; mini-urban orchards; raised-bed gardens for vegetable, flowers and berry bushes; bird feeders with naturecams; bird houses with naturecams; butterfly houses;

bat houses; a weather station; air quality monitoring stations; and soil and moisture monitoring stations. Picnic table umbrellas are used in four to six locations where activities are conducted to provide shelter and shade when needed. For the afterschool program, each area has an adult or older student who guides the activity.

Because there is a high level of trauma and stress in the neighborhood, a sanctuary refuge area has been established where anyone can go to feel safe and protected. "Sit spots" have been created where people can observe, calm themselves, and enjoy peace, beauty, and safety on the grounds of their community school.

FUNDING

Funding is important for the creation and sustainability of the project, but can present a challenge. The initial capital funds were provided by Trust for Public Lands and Mural Arts to build the physical infrastructure with new landscaping, raised garden beds, and other natural features. However, in order to keep the program alive, Interpret Green donated essential materials, labor, and funds to maintain the green school grounds over the past two years. Mural Arts has supported the greening and maintenance of the North Courtyard while they complete their capital projects at Cramp School. Operations and maintenance funding is described by Interpret Green as a systemic problem. Community schools are nevertheless an optimal site for green school grounds, as there is the potential for more in-kind support from the City and School District as well as local service organizations.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Green school grounds have been successfully developed and maintained at Cramp School. Initially there were nine community schools in the city. With the Mayor's leadership and commitment of many, there are now 12. In addition to use of the green school grounds by the students and their teachers during the school day, the school grounds are open to the wider community and are used in an afterschool program called the "Habitat Garden Club." The program is offered every Thursday, during both the school year and summer by Interpret Green and volunteer partners. Once a month, students harvest a flowering plant or food from the garden to take home to their families, which provides both physical and emotional nourishment. When a local, long-time resident of the neighborhood was asked how the success of the green school grounds could be measured, he said, "By the amount of laughter of the children."



We focus more on inspiration than information. The green school grounds are bringing life back into the community. More than anything, we want to be advocates and evangelists for this kind of school. To have a safe, nurtured, beautiful area that is alive creates such benefit for everyone in the community, especially the children."

—Craig Johnson,
habiteer for the William Cramp School and founder of Interpret Green.

LESSONS LEARNED

- > The most important reasons to create and implement green school grounds are: to expand and enhance the health and wellness of students mentally, physically and emotionally; increase students' attention span and school attendance; provide experiential learning; develop environmental literacy; and improve students' academic performance.
- > It is beneficial to use the term "green school grounds" because it conveys a vision of an integrated program of care, cultivation and curation for outdoors areas of the school. It helps communicate that the entire outside school grounds are an ecosystem for wellness, learning, recreation, play, art and inspiration for both the school's human children and for the children of all species.
- > Just one "green school ground" is not sustainable nor is it sufficient. Only a network of green schools with "green school grounds" and shared resources is viable and desirable.
- > Interpret Green sees a core opportunity for positive growth of green school grounds by evolving the buildings and grounds policies and guidelines of city agencies. Interpret Green advocates for the establishment of a leadership advisory board that includes school, community, city, nonprofit and business members to guide the evolution and expansion of "green school grounds" throughout Philadelphia.
- > The core team learned to improve K-5 student engagement by expanding activities that focus more on delight and insight than on instruction or training. Interpret Green learned that the power of the experience with nature was best guided by curiosity, wonder and play.
- > It is important to view the development of green school grounds as long-term habitat development, not as just a capital project that is done once and left behind. Don't stop it, keep it going, develop the trust.



More information available at interpretgreen.com and phila.gov/2018-09-28-how-community-schools-gardens-sow-the-seeds-for-learning/