Optimizing the Outdoors for Learning

Alum Rock Union School District

Focus Group Workshop
November 28th 3:00-4:15 pm | 2022

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Ed Specifications
& Standards

Next Steps:

Incorporate content from this interview into the Ed Specs design guidelines—then schedule round two video conference meetings with the same group to review the draft chapter for input in, March 2023.

Participants were oriented to understand what a Master Plan is and what Ed Specs are. Then highlights from the Ed Specs Visioning Workshop were shown, concluding with a list of learning shifts produced by Ed Specs Workshop participants as a vision for the future on the following page. After that, participants were asked a series of questions to confirm the program and vision for the future.

Learning Shifts Focus on Student Empowerment- DRAFT

ARUSD's learning environments will support students' development of ***mind, body and spirit.*** They will be empowered with the opportunity to try different ways of learning to discover how they learn best, ***find their spark*** and to ***keep the curiosity*** they were born with to become ***expert lifelong learners***. ARUSD will work to give students and families who need additional support to have an ***equal chance to thrive***, meeting all their needs.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO BECOME EXPERT LEARNERS

- Multi-sensory and multi-intelligences learning
- More control at the hands of the students
- Independent choice and/or collaborative elective periods
- Less teacher-directed time
- Students setting individual goals
- Student-driven activities
- Student-chosen schedules
- More independent work time
- Relaxation rooms
- No school uniforms

HIGHER COLLABORATION

- Team collaboration across studies, play, and extra-curricular activities
- Flexible and collaborative opportunities

EQUITY FOR STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

- Spaces to support personal and basic needs (i.e. laundry services)
- Full day kindergarten

MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT

- More outside and exploration time
- Play and naturalistic movement
- Bring community into the class
- Indoor and outdoor use spaces

Program Background:

- What learning is currently taking place outdoors besides play-based learning in ARUSD at all grade levels?
- What percentage of time do Pre-K spend outdoors?
- What percentage of time do Kinder spend outdoors?
- What percentage of time do Grades 1-5 spend outdoors?
- What percentage of time do Grades 6-8 spend outdoors?
    - Beyond recess, grades TK-5 currently have 30 minutes of outdoor, play-based learning per week through the Little Heroes program. During recess, grades TK-5 split their time eating lunch and playing outside by 20/40 minute periods.
    - Middle School, grades 6-8, spend a total of 1 hour and 45 minutes outdoors between P.E., snack, and lunch.

Participants were asked questions to confirm their programs.

Before going into the Big Picture Questions, reference images below were shared. Participants were invited to leave comments on the photos.

MURAL LINK

Outdoor Gathering

Sensory Learning

The courtyard design for the Cardinal Child Care Center includes different learning zones.

1. **SUSTAINABLE DESIGN** Buildings will be all-electric with efficient building envelopes and natural ventilation. Photovoltaic panels will generate on-site energy to offset 100% of the electricity use.
2. **THE PLAYHOUSE** A round amphitheater-style area for children to gather and play amid the pine trees.
3. **THE GARDEN** Growing areas and workspaces for children to experience plants and nature.
4. **THE GRASSLANDS** Shaded spaces adjacent to classrooms take learning outdoors.
5. **THE HILLS** Rolling mounds provide a safe play zone for children to climb and roll around.
6. **THE POND** A sensory garden with different textures and scented material to promote quiet and reflection.
7. **THE GROVE** Tiered seating under eucalyptus trees provides a place to study and work on projects.
8. **THE PATIO** A place for breaktime and play with fixed and movable furniture.

Big Picture Questions:

- Are there peer institutions or specific facilities of this nature you've seen that you've liked (or didn't)? What did you like (or dislike) about them?
- What programs could utilize outdoor spaces for purposeful learning?
- Have there been barriers to using the outdoors for learning? What are they?
- Research has pointed to the benefits to the developing brain to spend time outdoors. When students come back inside, they are better able to focus. What learning is currently taking place outdoors besides play-based learning?
- What learning activities could be supported by outdoor learning areas with the necessary infrastructure? What infrastructure is needed?
- If places were created on campuses for nature-based learning adjacent to indoor areas, would you envision learning being facilitated in those places?

Participants were asked questions to draw out their ideas to improve the learning environments to support the mission and vision of Alum Rock USD.

Big Picture Questions:

- Studies have shown that the jump from Elementary to Middle School can be a painful transition for adolescents, whose worries grow to include greater academic responsibility, burgeoning sexuality and complex social structures. Middle School is an awkward time of transition. What does “play” look like for Middle Schoolers? What environments would support students connecting with each other and talking to each other in person instead of through screens?
- What types of outdoor learning could be accommodated across each grade level?
- Is there anything else we should know about efforts made or a vision to optimize the outdoors for learning?

Participants were asked questions to draw out their ideas to improve the learning environments to support the mission and vision of Alum Rock USD.

Reference Projects Shared by Participants:

- Ocala STEAM Academy- Garden space.
- Ida Price Charter Middle School – Multi-level grass areas and tree areas.
- Steindorf STEAM School– Gathering areas.
- Nueva School- Accessible, green space integrated into site.
- Tamalpais High School – Embedded in redwood trees and lots of outdoor spaces for intimate setting for small groups.

The first question was intended to see if participants had reference projects to share with or felt that they were exemplary, whether it is in ARUSD or outside of the district. The following pages show the reference projects discussed.

Ocala STEAM Academy, ARUSD
Garden space

Ida Price Charter Middle School, Cambrian School District
Multi-level grass areas and tree areas

Steindorf STEAM School, Cambrian School District
Gathering spaces

Nueva School
Accessible green space

Tamalpais High School, TUHSD
Embedded redwood trees and outdoor spaces

The following pages show the participants answers placed in the sections in which they will appear in the educational specifications sections for this topic.

Sections:

1. Activities
2. Current Challenges
3. Design Objectives
4. Ideas for the Physical Environment
5. Affordances
6. Sizing and Adjacencies

1 Activities

- Social Emotional Learning support
- Project-based learning
- Student collaboration
- Messy exploration
- Art programs
- Programs that focus on sensory growth
- Open-ended learning self-directed study
- Teacher-led and small group instruction
- Inquiry-based learning such as explorative natural sciences
- Practice and performance space for music, jazz, and band programs
- Physical Education sports and training
- Yoga

2
Current Challenges

- Several campuses have way too much asphalt, not enough nature and trees die because of lack of maintenance. Other have a lot of unused green space because its not programmed so there is nothing to do.
- Outdoor learning is not prevalent on a majority of ARUSD campuses. Current barriers to outdoor learning include lack of quality outdoor spaces, physical organization of space that allows for supervision, engaging outdoor furniture, and time.
- Many of the campuses are lacking adequate shading either from trees or shade structures.Uneven hardscapes and fields, create challenges for using outdoor spaces for recreation or outdoor learning.
- The furniture on campuses does not support purposeful outdoor learning. There are not enough outdoor tables and they are made of metal grating that doesn't allw for activites such as writing and drawing. Benches are outdated, deteriorating, and usually aligned sparingly around the perimeter of the hardscape. This condition doesn't allow for group collaboration, engagement, or comfort.

2
Current Challenges

- There is a gap in district provided professional development training on how to handle different student needs that arise during outdoor learning. There are teacher concerns that need to be addressed such as: maintaining student focus outside to avoid straying from the larger curriculum schedule and goals and students being more exposed to the surrounding neighborhood and therefore potentially vulnerable.
- Lack of infrastructure outdoors such as WiFi, power and a source of water.

3
Design Objectives

- Create outdoor spaces with a focus on **place-making** to encourage student engagement.
- Design with **every discipline and every grade level** in mind; activities from writing to play should be planned for.
- Create connections between indoor and outdoor learning areas that support purposeful learning and can accomodate a whole class.
- Provide a **gathering space** outdoors for performance and assembly needs, such as band, drama, rallies, skits, etc.
- Use the outdoors as part of the school's signature.

3
Design Objectives

Ideas for the physical environment to support the vision for learning

- The vision is for **zoned outdoor areas** that create spaces for a variety of learning activities. These activities range from mind and body wellness through yoga and physical education, to school gardens that allow students to connect with nature.
- These zones should allow for proper **lines of sight** for teacher supervision, separation to help teachers manage students if multiple classes are outside at one time, and privacy from the surrounding neighborhood to reduce teacher fears of vulnerability.
- To create a productive workspace, there is an interest in **a variety of landscaping and shade solutions**. Any mixture of materials like synthetic turf, rubberized playground tiles, or wood decking incorporated with the grass fields and black top would open up opportunities for new learning activities.
- More trees on campuses (existing trees were provided by service learning programs).
- Add landscape that features **walking paths and benches** to counterbalance the amount of hardscaping and open field currently on campuses, provide opportunities for purposeful learning, slowing down and observing, and just being.

4
Affordances

Furniture, Equipment, and Technology

Furniture and Equipment

- Flat surface tables and comfortable seating that are arranged to support student pairs, small groups, and full classes
- Planters and bird feeders and gardens to use for learning about natural cycles, food production, and healthy eating
- Outdoor seating for self-directed, explorative learning
- Shade structures to protect from the elements to increase opportunities for outdoor learning
- Storage space for project-based learning materials, equipment, and technology

Technology

- A strong WiFi signal across the entirety of a campus as well as protected exterior power outlets

5

Sizing and Adjacencies

- Opportunities for a direct indoor and outdoor connection at collaborative spaces such as Makerspaces, Tinker Rooms, Music Rooms, etc.
- Provide a gathering space outdoors for performance and assembly needs such as band, drama, rallies, skits, etc.

Appendix

Please follow the links to the Mural board to see artifacts from the focus group interview and the Ed Specs Visioning Workshop link to see the Artifacts from the workshop.

Mural Link: HERE

Ed Specs Visioning Workshop Link: HERE