The Office of Child Development
Culver City Unified School District
A4LE Southern California Chapter
2021 Award of Excellence Entry
Concept:
The Play Hub is a pilot project for promoting Culver City USD’s district-wide master plans to future bond voters and to promote a cultural shift to more outdoor learning for equity in early childhood education. A donation from their neighbor Amazon supports this opportunity to create an outdoor space that supports equity by providing 3- to 5-year-old children with multiple means of engagement with each other in nature, meeting their sensory needs.

Goals:
The primary goal is to have students spend at least 50% of their time learning outdoors while having their sensory needs met, and to replicate this approach on the other campuses. A secondary goal is to disrupt the typical stale approaches to play yard planning beyond CCUSD, transforming predictable mundane playgrounds for just recess into spaces that provide variety for a lower cost than the traditional formulas.

Outcomes:
Post-occupancy evaluations will be conducted using a customized assessment tool measuring success based on two primary questions comparing the existing play yard with its plastic pre-fab play structure to the new nature-based Play Hub: 1) Is the Play Hub better at supporting CCUSD’s Reggio Emilia-inspired pedagogy and for STEM? 2) Is the Play Hub better at supporting the wide variety of needs of sensory motor learners?

Concept:
Children’s cognitive development is at its most crucial stage of development from birth to age 5. Children must exercise their brains, especially their sensory motor development, during the first five years of life. It is crucial for children to be empowered to explore the world around them through sensory experiences. Educators and psychologists emphasize the importance of outdoor play and interaction for the development of children, yet most students spend more time indoors than outdoors. A child who has opportunities to play in nature with their peers, and who has their sensory needs met, will have a better chance to thrive than a child who doesn’t.

What if all learning took place outdoors to support play-based learning and nature-based learning providing sensory engagement and variety for equity?
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It is a pioneering project for California public schools which typically consist of rubberized play surfaces and plastic play structures that are too prescribed, the result of leaving early childhood education experts out of the decision-making process and making low maintenance the top priority. The workshop process brought educators and Maintenance & Operations staff out of their silos to ensure the project includes their points of view for success. Another challenge for most public schools is to factor in DSA requirements that impact cost and time. This project has additional challenges of fast track schedule of four months for design to DSA submission, a hot bidding climate, and six weeks for summer construction.

Executive Summary

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History & Context

Culver City is a community within the arts- and culturally-rich creative economy of Los Angeles that is a part of CCUSD’s context. CCUSD is a small district consisting of a tight-knit, inclusive, and welcoming community with a very high level of diversity of staff and students of different races, religions, languages, and cultures that are celebrated. Being a small district helps unify the vision, allowing for evolution and progressive thinking. CCUSD supports the Arts and Arts Integration with the belief that the arts bring joy and wonder to both teaching and learning because the arts are a way for students to express themselves.
History & Context

From its humble beginnings in 1971, the Office of Child Development (OCD) serves close to 1,000 students and their families, providing full day and part day Pre-K including special education Pre-K, before- and after-school care, and summer enrichment camps at six sites for school-age students. The Play Hub pilot project is being built on the Farragut Elementary School campus which houses the program’s Administration Office.

The OCD program’s motto is “Engaging Young Minds, Exploring Possibilities” which has led to their growth. The curriculum enables children to build basic skills in language arts, science, social studies, and mathematics using a project-based learning model inspired by the Reggio Emilia-inspired pedagogy that is student-centered and experiential. The curriculum is planned to meet each child’s own individuality during the process of growing physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually.
A Play Hub Committee – consisting of a group of educators from the Pre-K program, a parent, a representative from the Culver City Education Foundation (CCEF) and a representative from Maintenance and Operations Team – met on the site to engage in a collaborative ideation process. The design firm and landscape architect began by sharing their program understanding to solicit feedback, then guided the participants to diagram their ideas on site plans. Next they shared their ideas in a gallery walk and gave each other feedback. Before leaving the workshop participants filled out exit tickets with opinions of the various options: three ideas that sounded great, two ideas that encourage behaviors for further exploration, and one idea to avoid.
With an available asset of a $250,000 donation by CCUSD's neighbor Amazon in December 2020, the spirit of the Play Hub Committee and design team all committed to rising to the challenge. The goal was to build out the project in the summer of 2021. This was a tall order because normally a project that involves the DSA (Division of State Architect) would take at least six months to get approval for construction. Normally a summer "sprint" project would be sent out to bid in February. Normally the contractor would purchase all of the FF&E. In this case the schedule had to be accelerated so the district could purchase the FF&E in March and get construction started mid-June 2021 for a 6-week construction period. Another challenge was a tight budget in a hot bidding climate, and 20% of the budget had to be earmarked for DSA ADA upgrades on the campus.
Educational Environment - Program Zoning

The zoning diagram shows the translation of the zones that would support early learners in developing gross motor skills, engaging the senses, and taking risks. The organizing concept is a reference to the Ballona Creek river that flows through Culver City. The river path serves as an element to organize the various activity zones. Because of the existing condition of 5th and 6th grade classrooms south of the Play Hub, the river also gives children a behavioral cue – quiet activities on the south side of the river and louder activities on the north side.
**Learning Play Hub - Planning Principles**

The planning principles were established to help the Play Hub Committee and Design Team make decisions and was reviewed quickly at the start of each meeting.

**Signage:** Amazon donor acknowledgment in a visible area.

**Approach to Gate:** Child-friendly non-institutional experience as students approach the gate with their parents.

**Entry:** Once inside, interactive elements help students make the transition to begin their day at school.

**Clear Path and Zones:** Clear, fun path of travel (can be sensory) with distinct zones along the way.

**Gross Motor Skills:** Area for exploring and risk taking in motor and muscular development.

**Transition Bridge:** Between the Gross Motor Zone and the Quiet Zone to help children be mindful as they enter.

**Integrate Nature:** Keep existing trees and grass, add more planting and natural elements.

**Materials for Nature-Based Learning:** Natural materials and colors or elements inspired by nature.

**Imaginative Play:** Space, fixed elements, and loose components to inspire childrens’ creativity.

**Dramatic Play:** Stage for performing and holding events such as graduation.

**Sensory Experience:** Materials for sensory experiences, both vertically and underfoot.

**Spatial Awareness:** Elements to help children understand where their bodies are in space and how they move.

**Experiential Learning:** Exploratory with a loose structure.

**Art:** Students explore different making opportunities in designated spaces.
Pre-K teachers were doing an amazing job of supporting the Reggio Emilia-inspired approach to pedagogy and project-based learning with facilities that were not designed to support this approach. The photo on the right shows a makeshift shade structure installed to protect all the materials and affordances needed. Much of it had to be carried out to the play yard daily. In the new Play Hub, the activity stations will be ready for learners to choose from just as they typically are inside of a classroom.
At CCUSD, multiple entry points for broad experiences are available to all students to help them become expert learners. The Play Hub is a Universal Design Learning (UDL) environment that is part of an inclusive approach removing labels regarding students with special sensory needs. It acknowledges that each child has different sensory needs and develops at his or her own pace. When those sensory needs are met, they are better able to learn. The offering of choices to engage the senses begins at the “entry portal” after the children say their goodbyes to their caregivers for the day and begin the school day.
Sensory Path

Educational Environment

The sensory path is part of the “river” path that organizes the site into a quiet and a loud side. It is a twelve-foot section with multiple textures for early learners to experience different textures from nature with bare feet. The design team learned from the educators that not only is it important for brain development to use the tactile sense with one’s hands, but also underfoot. At the entry, another section of the path frames different types of stone textures to use for nature-based art such as dry rubbings.
Empowering Learners

Developing gross motor skills, engaging the senses, and taking risks are mission critical goals for the CCUSD early learning experience. Many learning activities that best serve these goals are not possible in an indoor environment. The Play Hub not only makes these activities possible, it allows indoor activities to take place in nature: in open air, under open sky, with daylight. Neuroscience research shows that learning in these conditions keeps students engaged, adds novelty, feeds oxygen to the brain, and supports neuromuscular growth. In addition to supporting experiential learning and sensory integration, outdoor learning has the secondary benefit of improving students’ indoor behavior.
Often playgrounds in public schools lack enough shade for today’s climate which is much hotter than it was 10-20 years ago. Sometimes the reason goes back to the fact that adding large shade structures is defined by building code as a space with a number of occupants as if it were an indoor space triggering a need for more exits to meet fire code. Another reason can simply be a lack of funding. The design team did solar studies for the year-round program to come up with the best solution to make the Play Hub thermally comfortable.

Physical Environment
Solar Studies

Winter Solstice 9 AM
Summer Solstice 9 AM

Winter Solstice 12 AM
Summer Solstice 12 AM

Winter Solstice 3 PM
Summer Solstice 3 PM
Physical Environment
Variety for Experiential Learning

By replacing the space and fall zone, a traditional plastic play structure would require with a large shaded Gross Motor Zone with minimal affordances and more loose parts, early learners are presented with a wide variety of choices for student-centered experiential learning. The Play Hub supports singing, dancing, producing art, mud play, puzzle preparing, story reading, puppet manipulating, and game playing, in addition to taking part in vigorous physical activity such as running, jumping, climbing, digging, and building.
Physical Environment
Non-Institutional and Engaging the Senses

The existing chain link fence is necessary for site security, but it gives the environment an institutional feel. The engagement of the senses is invited along ten freestanding vertical wood fence panes along the west chain link fence, dividing the OCD campus from Farragut Elementary School. Each panel is 3’ high x 8’ long to minimize labor and material waste. Sensory experiences include:

- Tactile panels to engage by touching different materials.
- Plant pockets for the sense of smell
- Gross motor tracking
- Climbing wall
- Loom for fine gross motor
Physical Environment
Connecting to Nature and Each Other

The Play Hub supports equity by providing early learners with opportunities to connect with each other in a setting that is much more nature-based and open-ended to inspire creativity than the existing play yard.
Physical Environment

Adapting to the Seasons

The makeshift existing shade structure was a response by the teachers to have space that is thermally comfortable for learning. A permanent large shade structure would make the space too cold in winter and would trigger the need for more exits to meet fire code. The solution was posed by the educators to use retractable umbrellas to use as a teaching moment for early learners. Just as you would set up your umbrella at a beach, the teachers will open and close umbrellas with the students as needed in this zone. Umbrellas smaller than 12’x12’ do not require DSA approval.
To finish creating a sense of place, the design team was inspired by a fence rope mural at Citizens of the World Charter School in Los Angeles lead by an architect parent Siobhan Burke of Lyric Design and Planning. The images below show a mural created by the school community to create a vibrant vertical ‘welcome mat’ for their school.

At CCUSD’s Play Hub the first steps of engaging the community have begun with the art teacher working with students in Pre-K-5 asking them to create a work of art in response to the prompt “What do you love most about nature?” The students’ work will be synthesized this summer to propose a mural the community of families and volunteers will install in the fall to celebrate the opening of the new Play Hub thanks to the $250,000 donation by Amazon.

Not only will the Play Hub be great for outdoor learning as well as seeing equity as a topic beyond simply race, affecting students in many ways: it will create a sense of place, it will provide student agency, and will value the importance of art. The hope is this small project that does a lot with a little will inspire other public-school districts to re-think their approach to early childhood play yards and involve educators in the planning process. Post-occupancy evaluations will be conducted using a customized assessment tool measuring success comparing the existing play yard to the new nature-based Play Hub.

_CWC: From Mountains to Sea_ is a chain link mural project created for the Citizens of the World Hollywood Elementary School.