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A Focus on Connecting with the Outdoors – Oak Meadow School

“Look at this huge, ginormous outside space,” shouts an excited children's house student at Oak Meadow School in Littleton, Massachusetts – a rural community located about 30 miles northwest of Boston. After he twirls around on the freshly sodded playing field, he runs over to join his classmates in the garden, where school naturalist Stephen DeFlorio encourages the students to harvest the corn, tomatoes, and goji berries that they helped plant earlier in the year.

Moments later, a lower elementary class stretches across the field holding onto a knotted rope, working together to record some measurements. They finish this task and walk a few feet away to the newly installed outdoor classroom where they continue their lesson. Throughout the day, the students and staff at Oak Meadow take advantage of the new outdoor spaces that are available to them – including a sports court, terraces that provide outdoor extensions of the interior classrooms, and a rain garden, which collects surface water runoff and reuses it to sustain a garden of native flora.

These outdoor spaces at Oak Meadow – a Montessori school that serves children from 18 months old through eighth grade – are part of a broader focus on incorporating the natural world into everyday experiences, both through planned curriculum and self-discovery opportunities. The idea to enhance the school's grounds was borne out of the Montessori philosophy, which encourages the cultivation of “confident, independent, and compassionate human beings by providing the tools and experiences needed to embark on rich, meaningful journeys as responsible citizens of the world.”

Barbara Brady, acting chairwoman of Oak Meadow's Board of Trustees, says that these Montessori principles – combined with the results of a “school-wide strategic visioning process” and increased research indicating that children were spending more time indoors than previous generations – began to drive a conversation within the school about better incorporating the natural world into the daily curriculum.

“We had a good amount of under-utilized space outside,” says Brady. “Teachers tried to incorporate the outside into their learning, but it became a strategic goal to develop the rest of the campus in a way that would complement the inside learning that teachers were providing.”

Armed with input from teachers, families, and other supporters of the school, Brady says the Board of Trustees worked with the Head of school to develop a “schematic master plan for the grounds with the intent of offering more multi-sensory opportunities for discovery in classes.” Three goals were identified: to create outdoor learning spaces that promote hands-on exploration and discovery, to significantly improve open play areas with an expanded sod field and a sports court, and to reconfigure the parking lot to promote better traffic flow and safety.

Over the next several months, Brady, who has experience in landscape and public space design, collaborated with other members of the Board and Oak Meadow community to develop a design concept. “We wanted to offer an interesting real-world backdrop and problem-solving opportunities for all children at age-appropriate levels,” says Brady. “Nature-based learning programs just offer tremendous richness toward that goal.”

With a blueprint in hand that , the Board officially launched a master plan campaign in March 2016 with a goal of raising \$200,000. Nearly 90% of that goal has already been reached. Head of School Bill Perrine notes that support of the project has been “tremendous,” with members of the school and local community contributing to the goal. Brady adds that, in addition to individual support from the community, corporate and foundation support has also been essential to the campaign. “The community really was very excited and very ready for this,” says Brady.

On a beautiful, sunny morning in early fall, supporters of the campaign were invited to join students and staff at a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the completion of the first phase of the project. Reception to the newly unveiled outdoor space was “overwhelmingly positive,” says Brady, noting that some members of the community were moved to tears. “It just proves to me that the theory that the school was ready for this space, and that it would be an added value, was true,” says Brady.

Brady adds that it is especially meaningful to see students make their own discoveries about the new outdoor spaces. “I could absolutely see that different personalities were finding the right spaces for themselves,” she says. “That was extremely rewarding.”

Perrine agrees. “Our first priority is to make sure we are using the current spaces well, and that they are supporting the curriculum and providing students with dynamic unstructured play opportunities,” he says. “I have been thrilled to see students using the spaces in all kinds of new ways.”

Although a large portion of the campus master plan campaign is complete, Perrine notes that there are plans in the works to develop additional sites on the school campus. “We hope to eventually connect the entire campus with walking paths, and create more outdoor classrooms and community spaces,” he says.

Additionally, Perrine hopes that Oak Meadow can serve as an inspiration to schools that want to more fully integrate nature-based learning into their curricula. “We hope that, through our experiences, we can become a resource for other schools and programs looking to build outdoor learning environments,” says Perrine.

In the meantime, Brady hopes that the students at Oak Meadow continue to find new ways of “connecting with the world around them” through use of the new outside spaces.

“I hope that the spaces will offer them the opportunity to learn even more deeply and discover for themselves how much of what they're learning is tied to marvels of the natural world,” she says. “And I hope that they view it as an exciting place to learn but, in turn, walk away with an innate understanding that everything we do has an impact on the world.”