

# COMMUNITY DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

## Carnell Scholars Drive Schoolyard Design

Volunteer design professionals from Stantec and the DeBruyn Group have received the Collaborative's 2019 Paul Sehnert Award for Community Design. Their work with Oxford Circle Christian Community Development Association (OCCDA) and students at Laura H. Carnell Elementary School will have a big impact on a diverse, dynamic Northeast Philadelphia community.



Our longstanding Community Design Award, presented annually at the AIA Philadelphia Design Awards, has been renamed to honor the late Paul Sehnert, a beloved Collaborative board leader and lifelong proponent of innovative urban design and development. Founder Dan Garofalo, AIA, introduced Paul to the Collaborative in 2010. He says, "Paul would be honored to have this award named after him. He was a tireless advocate for good design in all neighborhoods."

Oxford Circle residents and Carnell faculty, scholars, and parents worked with the Collaborative and a volunteer team of design professionals on a conceptual design for schoolyard improvements to expand the play (and learning!) experience at Carnell and create an amenity for the entire community.

### **A Safe Haven**

Currently, over 20 languages are spoken at Carnell Elementary School. Hilderbrand Pelzer, Principal of Carnell, says, "Oxford Circle has been a safe haven for immigrants and refugees coming to our city. The neighborhood has evolved over the time I've been here. While the community remains predominantly African American, it has grown more diverse. As a result, the school has grown more diverse."

Pelzer adds, "Last year, Philadelphia Magazine wrote an article about Oxford Circle ([Meet the New Northeast Philadelphia](#)). I was excited to see the neighborhood highlighted in this way. It put more urgency on us to be a part of this positive story. The schoolyard will help."

### **A Strong Partnership**

When Pelzer became principal of Carnell in 2012, he set to work with OCCCDA to welcome parents and other members of the community into the school. Outreach began with in-community meetings at the OCCCDA offices. The next step was to establish a family resource center inside the school.

"Through our Family Resource Center, OCCCDA staff members are physically present in the school five times a week, building relationships with parents and families of Carnell. We can present the school as a welcoming place," says Pearl Wang-Herrera, Executive Director of OCCCDA. "We can further the school's goal of having high-achieving scholars by increasing parental involvement and working with families to eliminate barriers to educational success." "We seek to be a bridge between home and school," adds Jen Leaman, Family Resource Coordinator for the Center.

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***Pearl Wang-Herrera, Executive Director, OCCCDA***

Carnell and OCCCDA have also partnered on a redesign of the school’s learning model with the School District of Philadelphia. “When we are able to get together on ‘big ticket’ items, we get an opportunity to venture into new territory, to learn together,” says Pelzer. “We get to look beyond the day-to-day.” The Collaborative facilitated their latest partnership—improvements to the Carnell schoolyard.

#### **A Multi-Use Schoolyard**

“Our schoolyard is only asphalt, some basketball courts, and a parking lot. We have a large school with multiple recesses and gym classes... plus our gym also serves as our lunchroom,” says Pelzer. “We jumped at the opportunity to create an outside space that could do multiple things.”

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***Hilderbrand Pelzer, Principal***

In the first community task force meeting for the project, Carnell’s physical education teacher observed, “We don’t have a way to separate groups when two gym classes, or a gym class and recess, happen at the same time. We have no way to define zones.”

The Family Resource Center only intensifies schoolyard use. “There are gym classes, recess, the after-school program, and the summer program. “The schoolyard gets used from sunrise to sunset,” says Evan Wilbert, a civil engineer at Stantec and a volunteer on the Collaborative volunteer team.

#### **Scholars Drive the Design**

Carnell’s schoolyard is situated between its main school building and the Little Schoolhouse, which houses its youngest students. From the volunteer team’s first walk-through, he recalls, “I liked the site. The buildings are set back from the property, so there is a buffer to the street. “Our challenge was to define areas of

activity—while keeping the space open enough for bigger games, running around, or morning line-up.”

*“The process was open-ended. Yet the students stuck pretty close to reality. They wanted more sports [space for soccer as well as basketball] and quieter places to sit down.”*

***Evan Wilbert, Stantec***

Faculty, parents, and residents participated in community task force meetings, but students (called *scholars* at Carnell) took a central role. Pelzer says, “Student representatives recruited from Carnell’s honors classes, or selected by our physical education teacher took ideas back to classroom. They led focus groups and presented student feedback at the next community task force meeting.”

“It was really great to hear everyone's opinions and ideas. And having so many stakeholders helped keep the process authentic,” says Leaman. “I believe it was the scholars who came up with the idea of a quiet space in the middle of a busy schoolyard -- a place away from the bustle to allow for quiet reading or just having some down time. This is important in a school body of 900 scholars!”

Wilbert says, “The process was open-ended. Yet the students stuck pretty close to reality. They wanted more sports [space for soccer as well as basketball] and quieter places to sit down. They thought that different members of the class would want that. I thought that was a very mature observation.”

*“We’re a diverse school and pur kids have diverse ideas of fun.”*

***Jen Leaman, Family Resource Coordinator,  
OCCDA***



## The Conceptual Plan

The centerpiece of the schoolyard will be a ground mural celebrating the community's diversity. New pathways are important too. The mural will be ringed by a running path. A painted path will link the main and the Little Schoolhouse buildings. A new ramp and pathway will make the schoolyard accessible to everyone in the community.

For active play, the basketball courts will be reconfigured to accommodate soccer and hockey games. An outdoor classroom and hang-out space with benches will provide an oasis within the larger space. An enclosed play area with a soft surfacing and mounds will provide a protected play space for the youngest students and act as a buffer between active play and the existing parking lot.

## Impact of Our Design Process

Carnell and OCCCDA had strong relationships with State Representative Jared Solomon, State Senator Christine Tartaglione, and Councilwoman Cherelle Parker prior to the project. "[Our elected officials] consistently had a staff presence at the task force meetings," says Pelzer. "We were also able to gain leverage with School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and tap into the SDP departments, like facilities and grant writing, needed to make this project happen."

Engagement of local elected officials and the School District of Philadelphia resulted in enthusiastic, informed advocacy for funding. In October 2018, OCCCDA received a grant of nearly \$200,000 from the Pennsylvania Department of

Community and Economic Development Greenways, Trails, and Recreation program and additional funds from Councilwoman Cherelle Parker for the first phase. Improvements will include the basketball and soccer courts, outdoor benches, a permeable play surface, and the running path.

Says Pelzer, "I'm excited about the schoolyard project because it's tangible for the kids. Our other projects have benefitted them, but the schoolyard is their life!

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