

Innovative Natural Playground is in the Works

by Karen L. Totten

Imagine that you are a school-age child. Now, imagine being able to spend every recess and lunch hour splashing about a rain garden or hopping between tree stump stepping-stones. Think of yourself lolling among the squash, kale and berries of generous garden spaces, or playing hide-and-seek among the wheat grass.

That's the vision of a captivating new play space for pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade students in the final planning stages at the Lower Campus of Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor. The design, by Shannan Gibb-Randall of InSite Design, has reached its end phase of development, with a grant from the James A. and Faith Knight Foundation enabling completion of the Master Plan. The school is now beginning fundraising, after which will follow solicitation of construction bids. Work on the grounds will be done in steps, as funding becomes available.

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Katrina Klaphake, Development Director at RSSAA, says that a natural playground concept is in keeping with the emphasis on creative, open-ended play that the Waldorf curriculum supports and the Waldorf pedagogy advocates. She notes that when the school began to contemplate improvements to its grounds over a year ago, they looked at "transforming the play space so that it could more fully encourage creative problem-solving and appropriate risk-taking." The goal is to honor the environment while simultaneously honoring each child's real need for less structured play.

Some of the planned changes include reshaping the landscape into gentle slopes and curves and removing many existing standard play structures. Those will be replaced with more open-ended pieces, such as wooden horses and stepping-stones. A rain garden will help drain water away from blacktop areas and direct spillage from the roof into a natural stream, trickling into an existing drain. It will also give children a place for water play. Some natural fences will be put in place to discourage grazing deer.

Additionally, the existing garden's size will be expanded to further use it as a teaching tool. Currently, second-grade students plant seeds in spring, tending them to sprout, later to return as third-graders who weed and harvest the crops for use in the annual Thanksgiving feast. Celia Larsen, school gardener and instructor, has fashioned a welcoming space in the garden's center, behind a curvaceous wood plank fence, where stands a larger-than-life garden matron statue. The matron is made of sticks and wood, sporting a ceramic head. Her generous hands, on corn-stalk arms, spread wide to gather the gardens together. It provides a lovely spot to sit and talk, or to invent games.

What advantage could all this beauty create in the mind, heart and soul of a seventh-grade student contemplating math or Renaissance history? What is its benefit for the third-grade student learning to build structures? Steiner himself said, "Before we think, before we so much as begin to set our thinking in motion, it is essential we experience the condition of wonder." The Waldorf curriculum honors the interest



and engagement of children with activities that lead to enthusiasm and awakening. Natural play areas will encourage in the students a love of the world they live in.

Renovating the outdoor space at Steiner is not a matter of simply making it more conducive to teaching academics by immersion, such as biology, but also it places an emphasis on letting children explore the outdoor environment and make it their own. They can look to the skies and watch the clouds and weather, see the movements of the birds and sun; they can dance among the flowers and be present as the seasons bring change. In this natural setting, via imaginative play, aspects of the good, the beautiful and the true can be developed. Through the hands, into the heart and mind, is nature and its wonders perceived. Then, each child can bring that wonder and inquisitiveness into the classroom.

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