



BRINGING UNDERUSED SPACES TO LIFE

Imaginative and strategic repurposing of underused spaces shows how modest budgets can strengthen enrollment, reinforce mission. "What was sort of a small idea — using space we had and enriching our existing program — turned into a creative way to bring people to our campus."

By Stacey Freed

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Strategic projects that expand facilities in ways that reflect and reinforce mission, identity and culture can help schools rebrand and attract new students.
- Building alone may not be enough; spreading the word helps support enrollment growth.
- Projects can start small and pick up momentum or begin with a robust vision that garners support and funding.

An unused classroom can be a worrisome sign of enrollment decline, but that wasn't the case at Springside Chestnut Hill Academy. In 2008, the preK–grade 12 day school in suburban Philadelphia saw the tail end of a large cohort of students move through the pipeline, leaving a smaller group of students and an empty classroom in its wake. Instead of fretting, “We looked at this as an opportunity and asked ourselves how this could help us,” said Frank Aloise, the school’s chief financial officer. Ten years later, the fruits of that thinking have spawned two widely admired new learning spaces that show how creative and adaptive re-use can strengthen a school’s brand and boost enrollment across all grades.

Lagging enrollment is a perpetual independent school issue. While it may be tempting for a school to build its way out of the problem, the solution is often considerably more affordable than new construction might be.

Slow and Steady

The incremental process at SCHA began when several teachers asked Aloise if they could use the empty classroom as a physics lab for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten girls (preK through grade 8 at SCHA is girls-only). “We thought it was a great idea and not a big expense,” he said.

Aloise, along with the school’s chief innovation officer, head of school and teachers, explored design ideas with Metcalfe Architecture & Design. They visited science museums and other schools’ play spaces. They asked students for input. Eventually, the school created “an awesome play space along the lines of a museum space” for about \$50,000, he said. At about 1,000 square feet, the physics lab “has water tables and sand tables and Velcro walls and other things teachers need to teach science concepts.”

The prekindergarten/kindergarten physics lab at Springside Chestnut Hill Academy



Build New or Remodel?

Alan Metcalfe, principal of Metcalfe Architecture & Design, suggests schools ask the following questions when planning spaces to boost enrollment:

- Will the feature be in a high-traffic spot, with lots of visibility to community, students and parents?
- Is the school committed to publicizing the changes?
- Does the project work in concert with the school's mission? Features that support a school's mission are easier to publicize and indicate clarity of vision.
- Does the school already have additional space it can leverage at little cost? Outdoor space is inexpensive to build on and is often more visible than indoor space.

As to whether to build new or renovate an existing space, "it's really situational, depending on available resources," said Metcalfe. Consider visibility in your analysis. If the potential existing space is an area visible to visitors and students (for example, near a dining area, cafeteria or the front door), renovating it might make more sense than building new in a location with less traffic. But new construction might be advisable in a situation in which "the administrator is betting that a new high-visibility feature will bring in 30 new students" who will need classroom space the school doesn't currently have.

But it wasn't until SCHA's admissions director suggested using the reimagined classroom as a field trip space for other schools that the room took on a greater purpose: enticing prospective enrollees. Ever since, outside preschools that use the space "don't have to go downtown, don't have to pay for a science museum and can see the richness of what we're doing," said Aloise. "Now all the preschools in our area know our school better than ever," and visiting parents "are impressed at what we're offering the youngest of our kids. They've met our teachers and seen our school. Teachers are recommending our school. What was sort of a small idea at first — using space we had and enriching our existing program — turned into a creative way to bring people to our campus."



The physics lab at Springside Chestnut Hill Academy, which is all-girls at the preK-8 levels.

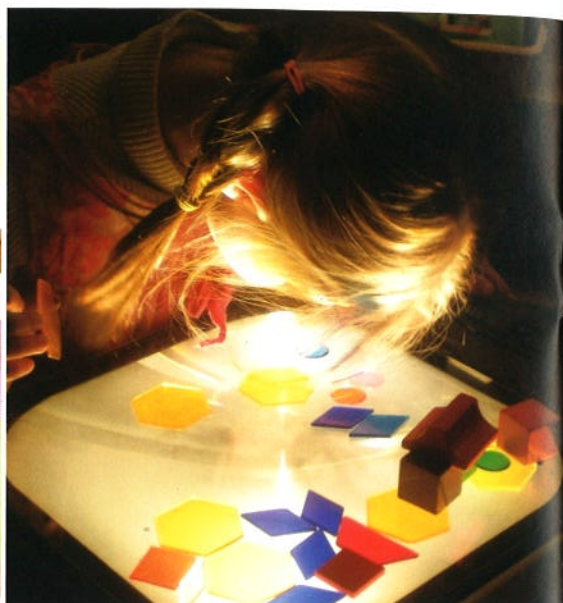
A few years later, in 2013, SCHA began to develop a program in entrepreneurship. "We thought it would be an innovative way to differentiate ourselves from other schools," explained Aloise. By 2015, students and teachers alike were incorporating the program's ideas into their classes. It was time to hire a dedicated teacher and add physical space, with the idea that entrepreneurship, too, would bring in more students.

What followed was the conversion of a former library into a creative workspace of about 4,500 square feet, comprising conference rooms and technology such as 3-D printers, woodworking equipment and sewing machines. Again, Metcalfe Architecture & Design developed the design plan. The total project cost about \$250,000, with SCHA's maintenance crew performing much of the labor.

Now called the Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership, the program "really became a new department in our school and absolutely helped our growth," Aloise said. Like the girls' physics lab, the school's CEL is well-known in the community and has been featured in myriad local media stories. He added that parents have said they chose SCHA because of the CEL program, whose success also inspired a \$1.5 million gift for the endowment.

Mission Critical

In evaluating whether a physical change to a school's facilities can strengthen



enrollment, inquire whether the proposed solution "is truly the solution to the problem you have," said Ingrid Boucher, founder and principal of Bloom Planning, a strategic planning firm based in Philadelphia. "It's easy to get drawn to something flashy, new and different, but if it's not strategically selected and in alignment with the school's identity, mission and program goals, it can end up being a waste and a loss." At SCHA, both the school's physics lab and its CEL enhance the school's mission to "inspire unbounded curiosity and independent thought" — perhaps one reason they have succeeded.

For Delaware Valley Friends School in Paoli, Pennsylvania, the challenge was different. Seeking an enrollment boost to strengthen financial footing, administrators at the learning differences school at one point considered merging with another school. Instead, they ultimately opted to expand beyond grades 6-12, adding a fifth grade for the 2016-17 school year, and third and fourth grades for 2017-18. However, the only outdoor play areas at the time were a soccer field and a small hardtop space with a basketball hoop. The younger students would need outdoor play space in addition to more classrooms.

Initially, said CFO Justin Wheeler, "I was envisioning a high-end pre-fab playground from a catalog." After the committee planning the space connected with Metcalfe Architecture & Design, the vision changed to something "more connected to the school's mission and culture." The committee



decided the playground project would have to be more nuanced than anything pre-fab; it would be a "full play-and-community space," he said. About half the length of a soccer field, the actual playground will feature landscaping, steel-and-wood clad climbing structures, logs and boulders for seating and a slide embedded in the earth.

To fund the project, DVFS developed a capital campaign, "Building Brighter Futures," to help potential donors understand the importance of bringing in younger students and developing an outdoor space. The campaign literature was explicit: "The longer kids' learning differences go unmet, the more damage they sustain to their feeling of self-worth, and the harder it is to remediate their learning needs." The goal was to raise \$360,000 to support a lower school assistant director/counselor, additional classrooms, some existing



The outdoor play and community space at Delaware Valley Friends School is scheduled for completion this spring.

classroom renovations, and the play and community space.

Getting stakeholder buy-in proved difficult at first. "A wall would go up with potential donors if we used the word 'playground' in connection with a project of this scale," Wheeler said. "The campaign was an effort to make the playground part of a larger narrative."

Showing potential donors the conceptual design helped them understand not only the project's scope but also how it would reflect the school's culture and mission. The campaign also emphasized the broader benefit of creating "a valuable space that could be used by the rest of the school even if in a few years, the addition of lower school grades didn't work out," Wheeler said. Moreover, locating it on a hill visible from the road would help DVFS reposition its brand; people driving by would no longer see a school that serves only older students.

In the end, DVFS raised \$410,000. The play and community space, requiring about \$230,000, is scheduled to be completed this spring. While it's too soon to forecast any impact on enrollment, the school has already grown significantly since adding the younger grades — from 149 students in 2016 to 187 now — and much of that growth has been at the elementary level, Wheeler said. The school's modeling predicts enrollment to be 196 for 2018-19. "Our annual operating model hits sustainability at 220 to 230 in



Making It Happen

To turn a space-related vision into reality, think about "the variables in the environment and what influence or control the CFO or the head of school has over them," said Ingrid Boucher of Bloom Planning in Philadelphia. Those variables include money; stakeholder buy-in, capacity and bandwidth; and leadership skills around decision-making and change management. Compare the risks of proceeding with the risks of doing nothing, she added.

The CEL buildout at SCHA was not a tough sell, in part because stakeholders could see growth happening with the program itself before the physical space was created. The CEL "came out of innovative, iterative ideas of small wins," Aloise said, taking a cue from the book "Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries," by Peter Sims, who Aloise heard speak at an NBOA Annual Meeting. "Rather than start with a big idea and a whole project," Aloise said, "you learn critical information from small wins."

At DVFS, the process was harder going. The architects undertook a lot of the stakeholder work by running the project committee meetings, Wheeler said. "We also had faculty, staff and board volunteers solicit gifts in pairs after receiving some basic training. I volunteered and was assigned four folks to solicit. If we hadn't done this, we never would have reached the number of people we needed to."

Spreading the word also supports a project's success. "When a school's done something to modernize its identity — whether it's an acquisition, new programming or growth — it's important to have a well-done branding campaign that leads to good social media interface and a more visual, obvious footprint," said Boucher. In other words, paraphrasing the 1989 movie "Field of Dreams," if you build it and publicize it, students might come.

2020-21, and that is probably the limit of our current building's capacity. So you might call it our targeted enrollment."



Stacey Freed is a freelance writer in Pittsford, New York. She has contributed to Net Assets since 2015.