



Facility Profile

SCHOOLS

A Dream Realized

BAYARD TAYLOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PHILADELPHIA

BY DAWN KLINGENSMITH

Until 2012, children at Bayard Taylor Elementary School in Philadelphia exercised and played on a blacktop resembling a derelict parking lot. It was scarcely better than nothing, as there is no other safe place to play outdoors within a 10-block radius of the school.

But things started looking up on June 1, 2012, when the Hamels Foundation donated \$300,000 for a complete outdoor renovation including a playground, a greenhouse, an iPad workstation (sponsored by Wells Fargo), chess and checker tables, a refurbished basketball court and a soccer field. More than 150 volunteers gathered for a successful push to complete the project in time for the 2012 school year. Today, the school boasts “probably one of the nicest playgrounds in Philadelphia,” said Keith Grimley of Kompan, the playground manufacturer that designed and equipped the play area.

Foundation founders Cole and Heidi Hamels were on hand to help volunteers with the finishing touches. Cole Hamels is the left-handed starting pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies. His foundation in previous years has contributed smaller amounts to different schools, but last year elected to sponsor a “landmark project,” said board member James Maransky.

As rumors mounted that the Phillies might trade Hamels, some speculated he wanted to leave a positive mark on Philadelphia besides his baseball legacy. However, the Phillies signed Hamels to a six-year contract last summer, enabling him to continue to build on his good deeds in the city. Previous grants have gone toward outdoor garden programs, fitness centers, science labs, music and performing arts programs, libraries, after-school athletic programs and team uniforms.

Now, in a strange twist to the story, the School District of Philadelphia has recommended that Taylor Elementary, along with 34 other schools, be closed. If approved, the closures will take place June 30. Ironically, Taylor students would be reassigned to Roberto Clemente Promise Academy, named for another legendary ballplayer.

Two other Hamels-supported schools are also on the chopping block, including Wilson Elementary School which in 2010 received a \$50,000 playground grant.

The foundation has vowed to fight the three closings, but the decision is ultimately up to the district, with the public’s input.

Met with excitement—the school principal called it “a dream”—and generous press coverage, the \$300,000 grant to Taylor went toward a new educational and recreational play yard, where children not only let off steam



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through play but also learn lessons in science, technology, physical education and teamwork.

Educational components include the game and work tables, all by the site furnishings company DuMor, as well as the greenhouse. Aesthetic elements include trees, landscaping beds and a mural depicting Hamel’s wind-up.

The 4,000-square-foot playground is dominated by Kompan’s Explorer Dome, a rope climbing structure that Grimley likens to a giant spider web. Spinners, climbing structures and other playground equipment in school colors complete the play area, where Hamel’s autograph appears in the rubber surfacing.

Altogether, the project’s cost would have exceeded the \$300,000 grant by a large margin; however, the school received several thousand dollars’ worth of donated services, equipment and manpower, Maransky said.

“To say the kids are thrilled with the results is an understatement,” he added. “They arrive at school early, and it looks like recess time. Before, they’d just stand there and wait for the doors to open.”

The project’s donors and volunteers wonder what will become of their investment, while parents and children worry about the fate of their urban oasis, so newly dedicated and yet so imminently at risk. Neighborhood children currently use it after hours and on weekends.

At a December public forum, a school official said plans for the playground are being studied.

Also up in the air is the fate of the historic school building, with its ornate entrance pavilion, stone detailing and brick parapet. Built in 1907-08 and named for poet and author Bayard Taylor, the school was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. **RM**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

DuMor: www.dumor.com

Hamels Foundation: www.thehamelsfoundation.org

Kompan: kompan.com

School District of Philadelphia: www.phila.k12.pa.us

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