Introduction

Just north of the intersection of I-65 and I-70, The Indianapolis Project School is 2.2 miles northeast of Monument Circle in downtown Indianapolis. It serves K-7 currently, expanding to eighth grade in 2011 with a long-term cap of 350 for the total number of students. Chartered in 2007, The Indianapolis Project School currently has 190 children. The school is located in a recently renovated manufacturing facility (The National Automobile Vehicle Company, originally built in 1904). The school has renovated 13,500 square feet to date of this existing structure. Currently, the school uses three portable classrooms until renovations of the second floor of the facility are completed. In addition to this innovative adaptive reuse building as a learning environment, the pedagogical focus is different from the norm. The students do not use textbooks and are assessed through qualitative means as opposed to daily grading systems. This is a teacher-designed school with a focus on social justice, community improvement, and project-based learning.

Overview

Location: Indianapolis, IN  
1145 E. 22nd St.  
Grades: Kindergarten-7th with additional grade 8th in 2011  
Students: 190 students with cap of 350  
Year Chartered: 2007  
Square Footage: 13,500 SF renovated in 30,000 SF available  

Learning Snapshot: P3 Project-based, Place-based, Problem-based curriculum

History

A small group of teachers founded The Project School in Indianapolis three years ago with the intent of creating a curriculum that focused on racial integration, maturity, and community involvement. The founders identified their firm beliefs and ideals for learning, and then looked at how the school’s design could support these educational intentions. A strong emphasis was to be placed on both physical and social environmental respect. With the uniqueness of the program, teachers are trained from within as interns while the ‘principal’ is titled School Leader. Reaching out to the affiliated Project School in Bloomington, the school leader from Indianapolis Project School is the head of the
PARTNER PROFILE: INDIANAPOLIS, IN

Mission

The mission of The Project School is “to uncover, recover and discover the unique gifts and talents that each child brings to school everyday. Our school works corroboratively with families, community members and social service agencies to solve real problems, as well as create art for public spaces. Students graduate from The Project School as stewards of the environment with the will, skill, capacity, and knowledge to contribute to the greater good.” (Indianapolis Project School website)

Vision

The vision of The Project School is “to eliminate the predictive value of race, class, gender and special capacities on student success in our school and in our communities by working together with families and community to ensure each child’s success.” (Indianapolis Project School website)

Philosophy

The Project School is focused on developing positive habits of the Heart, Mind, and Voice through project, place, and problem–based (the P3 Framework) curriculum. Through P3 Projects, students identify real issues in their communities and utilize community assets to address those issues. The Project School utilizes multiage teaming and discipline-based literacy and numeracy workshops to scaffold the skills students need to engage in highly authentic and integrated P3 Projects. Project School students engage in critical, creative, and reflective thinking, thus developing their intellectual character. The Project School is committed to teaching the whole child and developing socially conscious citizens, who can work corroboratively, lead others, and contribute to the greater good. (Project School Leader, Tarrance Banks)

Learning Style

Students take semester long projects and connect multiple subjects to that project. For example, if a student’s project is on tigers, that student will learn math, English, art, etc. in connection with tigers. This integrates every subject taught into one cohesive, grand lesson. The students are engaged in different projects everyday ranging from different cultures around the world to the community culture. No textbooks are used in the classroom. They are allowed to freely move throughout the classroom, though they remain focused despite any perceived commotion.

A family organization is being formed using the “Passions” technique. Here families meet and talk about their passions and how they can give back to the students and the school. They also discuss what they can do for the community. A “coffee clutch” for parents is held every Wednesday that involves parents with the school community. Parents are also welcome in the classroom anytime they would like. Music classes are offered to give students the opportunity to experience playing recorders and other instruments.

Demographics

18.5% of the current 190 students are in need of special education. 76% percent of the students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch.

Ethnicity 2008-09
- 7% Multiracial
- 2% Native American
- 1% Hispanic
- 69% Black
- 21% White

In total, 79% of the Indianapolis Project School’s students are a minority while the state’s average is 25%.

Figure 2.15.3: The openness of the adaptive reuse project allows classes to be flexible and fluid.

Figure 2.15.4: Spacious well lit halls provide access to classrooms.
Enrollment

In fall 2011, the school will add another year making it a K-8 school with no intentions of adding any more grades. The Project School will also cap future enrollment at 350 students. When and if needed, a lottery system of enrollment cap will be implemented.

Curriculum

The P3 curriculum is grounded in the idea that what is taught and learned should come “directly and authentically” from the community in which students live. Current contemporary school reform literature speaks to this “rigorous and relevant” curriculum. At The Project School relevant means real, where students work side-by-side community members on real projects with real issues that translate into building a better community for all. In this way, the school is the community and the community sees the school as a source of hope. The school's curriculum is a living, breathing entity that cares about the health and vibrancy of its community. Additionally, each week, students engage in “passions,” a time for parents, educators, or community members to lead a project or discussion on a passion of their choice. Tarrey Banks, School Leader of the Indianapolis Project School, recently lead a project that involved everyone in the making of colorful wooden picnic tables for the center courtyard.

With the school’s concentration on communication and relevance, each classroom has Apple computers and every teacher has an iPhone. This allows everyone the opportunity to be fully engaged in technology and informed of current events.

Daily Schedule

Each morning, students start the day with their home or “family group” in a morning meeting. These groups are usually two to three traditional grade levels and will be led by the same home or family teacher each day. Students stay with that family and teacher for three years, allowing teachers to get to know students and families deeply over time. After the morning meeting, students engage in a Linguistics and math Numeracy Workshop. During the disciplinary workshops, students can be grouped in many different ways (large groups, very small groups or one-on-one) based on their individual needs.

After lunch and a Bodily Kinesthetic experience, students are engaged in Passions, the arts, and the P3 curriculum. These units happen in large blocks and students are in multiage groups that will depend largely on the task and student choice. Teaming is utilized and teachers will design P3 projects that will be offered on a rotating basis, allowing students the benefit of multiple projects over a semester led by multiple teachers. This teaming structure helps build a culture around the notion that all students can work with and rely upon all teachers, and teachers never work in isolation.

Students at The Project School close each day with their home or family group. This is a time to take a reflective pause and engage in thinking and dialogue around the learning of the day and to prepare for the next day. This daily reflective ritual helps build a culture that values making meaning in community and being intentional about making thinking and understanding visible in order to examine our thought process and the thought process of others. (Project School Charter)

Community Enrichment

JTV Hill Park provides an outdoor area for the children to play in daily, barring poor weather. The Indianapolis Project School will receive a $75,000 grant to build an on-site playground. With the Monon Trail nearby, they are also

Figure 2.15.5: Tall ceilings and exposed mechanical and electrical systems provide learning opportunities in the flexible classroom space.

Figure 2.15.6: Maintaining the industrial feel to the adaptive reuse project, building services are exposed and large sash windows maintained.
building showers in the basement of the school to encourage teachers to bike to work. Throughout the building one can find artwork from the Harrison Center for the Arts donated via a partnership where The Indianapolis Project School sponsors that studio. The school also has partnerships with the Community Development Corporation and other local organizations. Each year, the school hosts a Curricular Summit where parents and community members are encouraged to join the school in developing the next year’s curriculum and focus. These summits aid the school in keeping student development relevant and community-focused.

Classroom

Philosophical team-teaching pairs groups of 35-50 multi-grade students with two teachers and a certified assistant teacher with special education and intern teachers floating into classrooms. Students who are misbehaving are not seen as needing to be punished; rather, they are provided time and space to calm down and collect themselves before returning to the classroom.

Student Life

Respect for others is not only practiced by the students to each other and adults, but from adults to students also. Students are encouraged to be fully engaged in their classes and independent as well. There is a small gym area for the students to expend energy, and the space for eating is not a cafeteria, but a few rows of pews for the children to sit on.

A grant is in place to build showers because The Indianapolis Project School’s position on the Monon Trail allows teachers to bike to work. The concentration on constructive reuse is reflected in the choice of using old factory buildings as a home. Continuous renovation on the buildings is being done with the idea of creating a green space for children to recognize the value, while also adding a gym area, more office and meeting space, and more classrooms.

Facility

Size: 13,500 SF of renovated space on main level

Architect: Axis Architecture

Year Renovated: 2008-09

Cost: Not Available

The Project School is located on the north side of Indianapolis in the Martindale Brightwood neighborhood on the Monon Trail (a converted railway bike and pedestrian trail system). The area around the school is economically disadvantaged. The school building itself is in a repurposed two-story structure that once housed the National Motor Company factory. This original industrial use poses brownfield challenges on the site as well as design challenges in how to turn the former factory into a school. To date, the first floor has been renovated and adapted to function as the primary school building. Temporary classrooms have been added to the school grounds while additional renovations are planned for the second level.

Spatial Systems

The first floor of the car factory turned school contains flexible classroom space, an art and movement area, offices, reception area, computer lab, and a large, multi-use common area. Multi-age classroom spaces are arranged linearly following the east/west axis of the rectangular factory building. The commons and administration area anchor the east end of the first floor and smaller gathering spaces (lunch, school meetings) terminate the west end. The school fronts a street to the north where large high window openings let indirect light in, and a narrow entry courtyard to the south.

While this linear spatial organization functions adequately for the basic needs of the lower elementary school, which it currently houses, it does lack storage space and poses acoustic challenges. The upper elementary age students are located in temporary classrooms on the site. For these students and as the population of the school expands, there is need to develop the second floor of the building, which currently only contains the principal’s office. In the second floor expansion, classrooms, restrooms, and storage areas will be added.

Circulation/Movement System

The Indianapolis Project School is strategically located in the heart of an inner-city residential neighborhood and on the Monon Trail. This location positions the school not only in walking distance from many of the school’s targeted neighborhoods, but also places the school in the flow of commuter traffic for families who live on the city’s north side and work in the...
downtown area. In addition to using all forms of public transportation, The Project School faculty with the Parent Organization developed a transportation support system to ensure that all children who are accepted into the school and cannot provide their own transportation will be able to attend school daily.

The entrance approach for The Project School is through a long exterior court. The ramp and stairs then lead one directly into the hub of the building, the commons space. Stairs from here will lead students to the upper level, while a long, single-loaded hallway runs along the perimeter of the building with generous light streaming in through large windows.

**Site Response**

The building is located on a property with lots of potential for future outdoor development. Although the school currently does not have an outdoor play area, they are planning on developing part of the property to include a playground and a learning garden that could also be used as an exterior classroom. Construction will begin on this in the summer 2010.

**Energy and Sustainable Issues**

To maximize light, advantage was taken of the natural light provided by the large windows. New energy efficient windows were fit within the existing openings. Skylights are also to be added on the second level. The high windows are operable and therefore aid in natural ventilation. Environmentally friendly materials are used for the renovation, including recycled content carpet, reclaimed wood, aluminum, sustainable upholstery and low voc paints.

**Safety and Security**

The entrance court and administration located immediately upon entry in the commons area, make the movement into the school safe and inviting. The area surrounding the school, however, provides a less secure feeling in terms of safety. The existing renovation and partial abandonment of the large factory building contributes to this uneasy feeling. As it is developed into a community center, there will hopefully be more “eyes on the street” and therefore a more secure Project School housed within.

**Building Systems**

High floor to floor space, exposed ductwork and electrical lighting, electrical wires running visible in cages hanging from the concrete ceilings, and no ceiling treatments contribute to the potential for the school to use this as a teaching tool. The acoustical separation between the classrooms, however, should be addressed. The school has the two required exit capacities, two existing stairs, and no dead end corridors. All corridors are of an appropriate fire rating and width and the building has a fully functioning sprinkler system. The building is also wireless.

**Interior Furnishings**

According to the P3 educational model for the Project School, classroom spaces need to be flexible, full of light, and contain lots of storage. The students and teachers like the industrial look of the building, especially its natural light and tall spaces. The classroom spaces allow for flexibility in their configuration, openness to the hallway with small “flex” learning spaces provided, and furniture arrangements which allow for easy adaptation to differing learning settings. Informal opportunities for learning also occur in the wide, well lit, “learning hallway” and the multi-use commons area, which connects all the classrooms horizontally and vertically. Problems occur, however, in the tall, untreated acoustical ceilings where noise transmission is high. Built-in storage areas or convenient closets for the teaching aids and computer technology would also be beneficial.

![Figure 2.15.9: Light fills the wide hallway of the main street through the school.](image)

![Figure 2.15.10: Daylighting and natural ventilation are provided in the classrooms.](image)

![Figure 2.15.11: The adapted spaces allow good flexibility in creating differing learning settings because of their size, scale, configuration, openness, and large amount of daylight.](image)
Funding

The Indianapolis Project School relies heavily on grants given by federal, state, and corporate organizations, in addition to tax dollars per student. They received a Federal Charter School Planning Grant for $60,000 and a Federal Charter School Start-up Grant for $125,000. They took out a loan from the State Bond Bank for the remaining amount needed to finance their building renovation.

S.W.O.T. Analysis

In a strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (S.W.O.T.) analysis of The Project School many positive qualities were noted. The philosophies behind The Indianapolis Project School are solid and community-oriented. With a significant emphasis on green living, the school is teaching its students a vast appreciation for the environment from the reuse of its building to the plans for gardens and outdoor science laboratories. The surrounding neighborhood could benefit more from having The Indianapolis Project School focusing on community-based programs.

The echoing sound in the building is extremely distracting and needs to be contained, especially in the stairwells and halls. Acoustic treatments in the ceiling and walls should be explored. The neighborhood also fails to provide a safe environment for the children to walk to local community organizations. As the building is further developed, its anchor in the community may help with this.

Future Plans

After clearing more land for safe use, The Indianapolis Project School will be building an outdoor play environment and an area for agricultural lessons. They are also in the process of making a compost pile and renovating another floor of their first building, which means adding another 13,000 sq. ft. With this renovation, they will add more play area and more classrooms.

The National Automobile and Vehicle Facility has over 280,000 SF of enclosed space. The developer has agreed to work with The Project School to grow into the space over a three year period. The amount of space required and how it should be configured will be determined, but the site and buildings offer ample flexibility in meeting both short and long term goals of The Project School.

Sources

The Indianapolis Project School Charter
The Project School website
Architecture for Humanity Open Architecture website

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Figure 2.15.12: A local architectural design firm worked with The Project School in developing ideas for the expansion of The Project School into the second level of the factory building.

Figure 2.15.13: The second floor of the repurposed factory is currently undergoing renovation for new classroom space as The Project School grows.

Figure 2.15.14: View from second story looking down courtyard entrance area.