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PBN PHOTO/STEPHANIE EWENS

BY DESIGN: Bernardo Garcia's letter to Lowe's Home Improvement helped The Learning Community land a grant for its new playground.

Playground project shows students power of literacy

BY JOHN LARRABEE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The playground behind **The Learning Community** charter school in Central Falls measures only 9,000 square feet, but to the kids running about there during recess it often feels much larger because it is packed with sensory experiences.

There's a small hill that children can climb, to feel the breeze or peer over the surrounding fences; a wooden deck shaded by a stately maple; plants that call to mind a forest edge or a meadow and even a small cascade that splashes forth when kids work a rustic water pump.

But that's not all that is unique about the playground, which until last year was nothing more than a paved lot. The driving forces behind the transformation were the students themselves, 340 youngsters in kindergarten and grades 1 through 6. They proposed the project, helped with the design, and secured the funding for construction – a \$110,000 grant from Lowe's Home Improvement, the national retail chain.

The story began three years ago, when second-graders decided the asphalt-covered lot was unsuitable as a schoolyard. The Learning Community, launched four years ago under the state's charter school program, is housed in a former nursing home, and at the time the property included very little green space. Teachers encouraged the students to form a "playground planning committee" to brainstorm ideas.

The project took another step forward last year, when a fourth-grade teacher gave students an assignment: write a letter about something they wanted to change, and send it to someone who might be able to help. Student Bernardo Garcia penned a persuasive missive to Lowe's executives requesting a donation of turf to cover the lot where students played.

"In the middle of a soccer game somebody gets hurt and they have to go to our nurse," he wrote. "Nurse Liz can't take that much chaos in her office."

The letter landed in the hands of Michael K. Brown, Lowe's executive vice president of store operations at the company's North Carolina headquarters. He contacted the school and told the staff they should apply for a grant from the company's charitable and educational foundation, which provides more than \$25 million a year for community projects across North America.

The executive and his young pen pal met face to face last month, at a school event celebrating the completion of the playground, dubbed The Imaginarium.

"Bernardo's message was so sincere and moving, I knew we had to do much more than donate sod," Brown told an audience of parents, teachers, and pupils.

"I've used Bernardo's letter to give some writing incentive to my own son, a 19-year-old college student," he said.

Brown wasn't the only one who got an earful from The Learning Community students. In essays and classroom discussions, they also churned out ideas for designer Laurencia Strauss. "I want to be high and low, far and close, fast and slow," wrote fifth-grader Elisa Tavaras.

"I asked the kids what they wanted to feel, what experiences they wanted to have, and turned them into specific forms," said

Strauss, a Providence resident and graduate of **Rhode Island School of Design**.

The result is a mini-park full of contrasting sights and sensations: flat and steep areas, covered with grass, mulch, rubber, pavement, or wood, to create both hard and soft surfaces. There's some traditional playground equipment, including a slide, a sand box, and a geodesic jungle gym, as well as some things that are unique.

The centerpiece is a small hill, for climbing or sliding. Through the center

runs a tunnel, which can be used for hiding, crawling, or listening to echoes. Plastic tubes popping out of the slopes allow a person on one side to shout messages to friends on the other.

The theme of contrasts is also reflected in the circles and squares painted on the pavement and other visual shapes, such the round tunnel opening and the angular wooden deck. Pathways are non-existent, to encourage students to wander at will and use their imagination.

There are several garden areas, in which plants are used to recreate various Rhode Island environments — a forest edge, an open field, a rocky ledge, and a watery shore. Strauss included plenty of trees and shrubs because she believes kids see too little green space in urban areas.

A labor brigade of parents and community volunteers turned Strauss' plans into a real park, with occasional help from construction contractors.

With construction complete, staff at The Learning Community now point to the playground when discussing their school's philosophy, which emphasizes the power of literacy and communication.

"We believe that literacy is a tool of change," said Meg O'Leary, one of the school's two co-directors. "Students should learn that using your voice, listening, and working on behalf of others are, important individual responsibilities." ■

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MICHAEL BROWN

Lowe's Home Improvement
executive vice president