

# The VOICE

*"Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." - Nelson Mandela*

## Play-Based Nature Learning at The Riverside: Transforming An Urban Outdoor Play Area at TCS



When The Children's School (TCS) moved from its Berwyn home of 12 years, it left behind access to a large green grassy field for outdoor play. For onsite outdoor play, the new Oak Park campus offered a smaller paved outdoor courtyard with little greenery. "This initially seemed like perhaps the biggest drawback of the move," says Christina Martin, director of curriculum and instruction for TCS.

The courtyard that seemed like a drawback, however, has now debuted as "The Riverside" – an innovative outdoor play space replete with alcoves for imaginative-play, physical challenges, and interaction with natural elements in new ways.

"Initially, we hashed over standard playground options like hopscotch, foursquare, tether balls, and other more common offerings you might find on a paved playlot," says Martin. However, that was before Lea Schweitz, PhD. joined the team.

In a fortunate coincidence, just as TCS made their move to Oak Park, Lea Schweitz visited TCS with her two young boys to explore future school options. In conversation, administrators discovered that Ms. Schweitz is an expert on urban green spaces and the importance of nature education in childhood development and learning. After studying both ecology and entomology as an undergrad, Ms. Schweitz earned her PhD from the University of Chicago School of Divinity. Her research there had centered on theology, spirituality, and urban nature.

"I visited TCS because I'd heard that so much of the learning here was already about nature play and nature education," says Schweitz. "This is truly vital. Research shows there really is such a thing as nature deficit disorder. Kids and adults both face the increasing extinction of nature experiences in our lives." She also appreciated TCS' commitment to environmental education and its social justice curriculum.

TCS proposed a working partnership, allowing Ms. Schweitz to guide the way in helping transform the new courtyard into a more inviting nature-based play area.

"One reason I was excited to work with TCS is its commitment to democratic process and incorporating the children's voices in the project," she says. "In progressive education, there's this deep priority for children's voices to count, and this can carry over into allowing them to have a say over their play spaces. Our goal was for the amazing faculty at TCS to begin building out a plan and then let the students shape how the place evolves."

After a brainstorming session, Schweitz and the TCS faculty group decided to create the space around a natural "riverside" theme. They painted a blue river on the asphalt and added elements to build on the theme. "The construction of the space was and continues to be more like a schoolwide community barn-raising, with everyone involved. It's not my vision, it's a



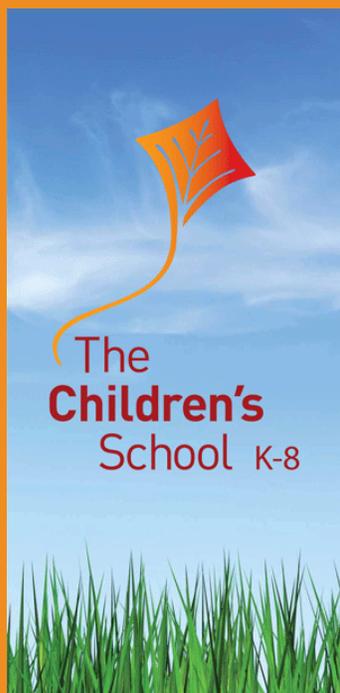
*"The Bluff" offers sand play (up) and an old hollow log (left)*



*Looking down on "The Riverside" now full of natural elements. (up)*



*An old rowboat offers a fun setting for imaginary play. (up)*



*An independent not-for-profit K-8 school that embraces progressive education.*

### TCS Play-Based Nature Learning (cont.)

coalescing of our group vision. Everybody shares ideas and muscle and we build it together.”

The upper balcony of the courtyard, dubbed “The Bluff,” now boasts a huge sand-play area with an adjacent mud kitchen. “We practiced deep listening with each other to identify what would be missed from the former Berwyn space. Sand play had been a cherished part of the outdoor experience in Berwyn for younger students, so we worked hard to incorporate sand into our plans.”

The Riverside and Bluff offer multiple play areas: A circle of enormous log stumps of varying heights and angles are perfect for jumping or as an impromptu outdoor seating area. A traditional playhouse and a rowboat offer venues for imaginative play. Nearby, children can build their own play forts or innovate structures with a wide assortment of scrap lumber, bricks, branches, sticks, and twigs.

There is room here for students to take risks, handle heavier materials, and play unstructured games of their own design. Both the non-traditional look of the space, with its rough and recycled materials, as well as the very real risks involved in jumping from one sharply angled log to another, or wielding bricks, eight-foot timbers, and heavy shovels, takes some visitors aback. However, such materials would be very familiar at the adventure playgrounds appearing in Denmark, Great Britain, Japan and elsewhere. (See sidebar for more information on adventure playgrounds and the benefits of nature-play.)

“We know that an element of risk-taking is an essential component of learning, and of building self-confidence and self-esteem for children,” explains Christina Martin. “We aimed for a balance in our Riverside that allows open-ended nature play, large motor and sensory experiences, and reasonable risk for all our students K-8.”

Ms. Martin reports: “Indeed, we have seen a few scrapes and bumps and sore muscles. But we are also seeing extraordinary play in that space, play that is collaborative, multi-age, immersive, joyful, and purposeful.”

Plans are still unfolding as Ms. Schweitz and TCS hope to add a vertical garden, rainwater harvesting for a water wall offering hydro-engineering play, and the continual adapting of features based on feedback from students and faculty as we evaluate how the children are using the space and its materials.

The Riverside is now one part of what Lea Schweitz praises as the three critical pieces of nature experience for school age children at TCS: inside nature play (exploring nature inside the classroom), outside nature play (in the courtyard, walking outside in the neighborhood, or in nearby parks), and “beyond” nature play (field trips to the forest preserves, outdoor sites, and excursions).

The Riverside has also transformed an asphalt courtyard from a perceived limitation to a valuable asset for TCS in play-based learning.

*Everyone loves playing on the stump circle! Even Lea Schweitz, PhD, co-creator of The Riverside.*



### More Resources

Read more on childhood benefits of nature-play and the developmental need for risk-taking through the following resources:

Here is a wonderful online resource for families on the benefit of nature and nature play for children:

[www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org)

This website explores the many advantages and styles of green schoolyards:

[www.greenschoolyards.org](http://www.greenschoolyards.org)

“*The Overprotected Kid*” is a great article in [The Atlantic](http://www.theatlantic.com) about the adventure playground movement, and the benefits of offering children opportunities for assessing and taking risks. <https://bit.ly/2oLk620>.

“*The Politics of Play*” in [Orion Magazine](http://www.orionmagazine.com), examines the many consequences of risk-averse child-rearing on society as a whole. <https://bit.ly/2PvbpX4>

### Recommended Books:

*Last Child in the Woods*  
by Richard Louv

*The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity and the Natural World*  
eds. Alison Hawthorne Deming and Lauret E. Savoy

*The Sense of Wonder*  
by Rachel Carson

*The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes us Happier, healthier and More Creative* by Florence Williams, NYT review:  
<https://nyti.ms/2mANYMW>

## Kid's Project: Out of This World After-School Care At TCS

After school, some kids at TCS are traveling to other galaxies, meeting mythical characters that created the planets, and enjoying a wide range of visual and performing arts as a way to express their ideas and imagination. It's all part of this year's theme, "Journeys Into a World of Imagination" chosen by our after-school Kid's Project.

Kid's Project is play and project-based and available for grades K-8. Run by the teaching artists of Chicago Danztheatre Ensemble (CDE), Kids Project offers students a secure, convenient, and creative theatre and visual-arts based after-school option through 6 pm every full school day. CDE's mission is dedicated to "performance with a purpose." CDE challenges, engages, and inspires audiences both onstage and in the classroom, through innovative, multidisciplinary storytelling in the genre of *tanztheatre*, "which unites all art media to achieve an all-embracing, radical change in humankind." The Ensemble collaboratively creates thought-provoking arts performances as well as educational outreach like the after-school program at TCS. This is our 12th year of working with CDE!



*Adding food coloring to water and watching it disperse through the overhead projector during an art project on galaxies. Mythology and art can lead to science and space exploration, all with an emphasis on fun!*

As part of this year's theme, Kids Project is exploring the imaginative world of storytelling. Instead of just listening to or reading each story, children will step inside the story and explore through dance, theater, visual art, and video. Some of the stories the group will explore are *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, mythology, and global fairytales. Currently the group is exploring mythology surrounding the creation of the universe and its galaxies. In a few weeks, they'll be exploring stories about the constellations. For a final project, participants will be creating a new planet populated by the characters they've met in our tales, and stories from the students' imaginations.

On Mondays and Fridays, the group focuses on visual art, while on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, they focus on theatre, dance, storytelling, and art-making.

A typical schedule begins with a snack and a check in. During check-in, each child reports on their thorns and roses for the day. A rose is something good that happened that day, while a thorn might be something disappointing or challenging. Some days children have two roses, and other days, two thorns. This provides a transition from the school day, giving kids a time to de-stress and reflect. The heart of the afternoon is project activity. The projects are geared toward fun, imagination, and the arts. Afterward, there is ample time for supervised play and relaxation.

You can learn more about Kid's Project at [www.thechildrensschool.info](http://www.thechildrensschool.info), or watch a video about the program on our YouTube Channel (linked from our website).



*A group of happy mythological creatures.*

## After-School Workshops at TCS



*Two of our most popular workshops every year are Chess Club and Cooking. Here is the Chess Club in action, and a plate of delicious chocolate covered snacks made by the Cooking Club on their day focusing on "presentation."*

In addition to Kid's Project After-School Care, The Children's School offers several after-school workshops each trimester according to children's interests. The clubs meet one afternoon each week, and are normally led by a faculty or community member with expertise in the workshop topic.

Our current workshops include: Chess Club, Cooking Club, Coding, and Pottery. There is a possibility we will be offering Basketball and a Running Club later in the year, with other workshop topics under consideration.

We are always looking for new ideas and leaders excited about sharing their talent with students in new workshop topics, so please call if you are interested or have a new idea for a great workshop!

## More Learning Choices with Middle School Electives

This is the first year that The Children's School is offering elective courses for middle school students. Electives empower students to pursue an area of curiosity more deeply, and allow students to take ownership of their school experience. Electives also give adolescents a taste of choice-making they'll experience in future high school and college environments.

The electives replace regular Music, Physical Wellness, and Art classes. "We did our best to help students enroll in their first choices, while also ensuring they meet the requirements of 2 Physical Wellness courses, 1 Art, and 1 Music course throughout the year. The electives also provide an opportunity for learning in mixed-age groups," says TCS 7th grade teacher Melissa Barone.

Each set of 2 electives lasts for 10 weeks, and take place on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. Here are course descriptions for electives that middle level students are currently enjoying, and others we may offer during the 2018-19 or the next school year.

### Current Electives

**Non-Traditional Sports:** Tchoukball, Team Handball, Omnikin Ball, and Ultimate Frisbee. These exciting non-traditional team sports develop communication, team building, and conflict resolution. We'll learn the skills and rules necessary to play each sport. This class is great for students of all skill levels.

**Mindfulness and Lifetime Fitness:** Mindfulness is the act of improving awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and how they affect your body. We'll practice yoga and learn various forms of martial arts including Tai Chi and Chi Gong. These lifetime fitness activities help calm the nervous system, decrease stress, increase body awareness, and improve core strength. In addition, we'll go on meditative walks around the neighborhood and discover how hiking can be a wonderful form of exercise.

**Wabi Sabi:** Explore the Japanese philosophical and aesthetic attitude known as Wabi Sabi. We trace the history of Wabi Sabi from ancient times to modern day, and the Zen way of artistic creation. Students are challenged to consider how a Wabi Sabi attitude might be useful in their everyday lives. We will learn the basics of tea ceremony, make tea bowls, and practice doing/being Wabi Sabi.

**Street Art:** Street Art can create visually rich and exciting environments, revitalize public spaces, and encourage community engagement. But... what is the difference between Street Art, Graffiti, and Vandalism? We'll consider these questions as we explore the public art and street art in the neighborhood surrounding our new campus. Then we'll conceive, design, and execute our own "Street Art" in the halls of The Children's School.

**Music in the Media:** Study and listen to music themes from TV shows and movies, film background music, and jingles from commercials. Create your own jingle for your favorite product or compose music for a movie scene. Produce manuscripts, scores, or record your own music.

**World Languages: Spanish -** World Language electives at TCS are designed to provide students with a novice proficiency in interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational communication where students are able to identify and utilize memorized words and phrases in familiar situations.

### Possible Future Electives

**Music, Movement, and Keeping the Beat:** Experience music and dance styles from different countries and cultures.

**Team Sports:** As a group we will decide what sports we will compete in, as each student takes a key role on their team.

**Individual Sports/Backyard Games:** Tennis, Pickleball, Badminton, Ping Pong, Golf, and Archery.

**Music and Theater:** Stage a one-act scene from an existing musical, or create our own short play.

**Earth Beat:** Make and play clay drums based on traditional drums of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.

**Beginning Wheel Throwing:** Learn how to use a pottery wheel and basic pottery techniques. Finished work will be glazed and fired at GP Tetrev Pottery.

**Who Lived Here?:** Re-create with clay our replicas of ancient artifacts archeologists have excavated in the Chicago area.

**World Languages: Arabic -** World Language electives at TCS are designed to provide students with a novice proficiency in interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational communication where students are able to identify and utilize memorized words and phrases in familiar situations.

*(l-r) Photos of a street art project, a trip to GPTetrev Pottery Studio, and partnered yoga.*



## TCS 2018 High School Expo

by 7th-Grader Matthew D. Erlec



Matthew Erlec, 7th Grade

In November, TCS held a high school expo for a selection of high schools to come and present to us their programs, philosophies, curriculums and general basis of their schools. It was a great opportunity for students to get an introduction or make a further decision on their next chapter of education in high school. I got an opportunity to speak to some students that attended the event and find out what was taken away. So here's a student perspective of the event.

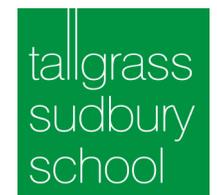
Surely a question parents and students are asking is did the event further decisions? Well feedback I received from students was that the information they got from the schools was very helpful. Students were intrigued in programs that were relevant to their interests, everyone was able to find something applicable to what they found fascinating. Students stated their surprise and pleasure with their being a wide variety of clubs, activities and courses to choose from. I feel and it seems that others were happy with the schools presented at the event in relationship to our individual wants and needs.

A further question I know I was interested in is: do students want to maintain progressive and project based philosophies in high school? As an individual I would like to be in a space where it does not necessarily have to be progressive but it is open to spaces (such as clubs) in which there can be progressive practices. Feedback I got from other students really varied. "I was very surprised how similar they are to The Children's School in a way. Very project based and progressive..." said a student in the 7th grade at TCS. He then went on to say "Which to an extent I am looking for. I think I really thrive in project based learning." Another 7th grader had something different to say: "Here we have quite a bit of freedom and I know for me personally I need more of a structure." Opinions really varied based on what students needed individually, which is really a good thing and I feel says something about TCS and the benefits of focusing on each student's needs as an individual.

I feel that the fact me and other students at this event found interest in some of the programs, clubs and activities due to relation to our personal interests signifies a certain amount of preparedness. As from what I've heard from many parents and other students is that they want to be prepared for high school. In conclusion, I feel that TCS does not necessarily teach students to continue their academic journey in progressive education spaces (which is does for some) but it prepares them to carry progressive practice or methods and continue to exercise critical thinking for a lifetime to come.

*"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." - John Dewey*

It was nice to talk to all the schools and learn about some other ways of education. The next TCS high school expo will occur in 2020. I hope everyone had a good and helpful experience at the event. I feel this was a very successful event and I look forward to learning more about these schools in the future.



### High Schools and Colleges Where You'll Find TCS Alumni

Oak Park River Forest High School  
 Illinois Math & Science Academy  
 GCE Lab School  
 Fenwick  
 Latin School of Chicago  
 Fusion Academy  
 Wolcott School

Trinity High School  
 Tallgrass Sudbury  
 Beacon Academy  
 Nazareth Academy  
 St. Ignatius High School  
 Morton East High School  
 Murray State University  
 Santa Clara University  
 Yale University

Vanderbilt University  
 Whitman College  
 Roosevelt University  
 Lawrence University  
 Drake University  
 Coe College  
 University of Puget Sound  
 University of Illinois - Chicago

## How Can You Help Support TCS?

In addition to the generous gifts we receive during our annual appeal, there are dozens of ways our parents, families, and friends can help support our programs at The Children's School. If you are interested in learning more about the opportunities below, contact our administrative office at 708-484-8033.

### Volunteer in the Classroom or for Field Trips

Many of our classrooms are still looking for parents/family members to help with class activities or assist in chaperoning on field trips. Contact your child's teacher!

### Spread the Word About TCS and Subscribe to Us Online

Pass along this newsletter to a friend or neighbor with preschool or school-aged children! Invite them to a tour! We also need your support on our social network sites. Please "like" our official Facebook page and subscribe to our YouTube channel. Share our videos and posts! You can find links to both at the top of our website.

### Be a Guest Speaker or Student Project Mentor

Every year, we seek out adults in the community who have expertise in areas that correspond to student group and individual projects. This is especially true with our 8th-grade Capstone Projects. We also seek adults who wish to sit in on the review committees for each Capstone Project Presentation to give our students feedback.

### Serve on the TCS Board or a Board Committee

We have several board committees, including: a fundraising committee that plans our annual benefit, a social committee that plans events for our school community, and other committees that provide a great way to connect with other TCS families for fun projects that help TCS. Don't forget, each year we elect our board and welcome new candidates who would like to help steer the direction of our school and its programs.

### Help TCS Keep Oak Park Beautiful

This year, The Children's School signed up to "adopt-a-block," agreeing to pick up litter along the 300 block of South Oak Park Avenue once each month. If you or your family would like to volunteer for a month, we can supply plastic gloves and trash bags. We clean both sides of the street, and the job takes about 20 - 30 minutes!

### Make All Your Online Purchases Through "Amazon Smile"

The Children's School participates in the "Amazon Smile" program, whereby Amazon.com will donate a portion of your purchase price back to TCS if you go to the site via our special Amazon Smiles link. You can find the link at the bottom of our website. Why not link and bookmark it as the first stop for all your online shopping?

## Meet Victoria Jones, Our New 1st Grade Associate Teacher

The Children's School welcomes a new teacher to the team in 2018-19, Ms. Victoria Jones. "I've always had a passion for helping others, specifically children. While pursuing my BSW at Illinois State, I had a change of heart when I began working with adults with developmental disabilities. Shortly after, I became a caregiver for children with high and low-functioning autism and it changed my life forever." Victoria became a valuable asset to the faculty from day one. She currently works in tandem with first grade teacher, Ms. Lucy Coria. "Things are going well for me! I like that I'm able to share all of my talents and interests with children of TCS both inside and outside of the classroom. I recently started Cooking Workshops with my class, along with a Cooking Club after school. *(In addition to teaching, Victoria also owns a catering business!)* It's been amazing to hear all of the ideas the students have about what they would like to learn and make. Overall, I'm just happy to be here!" The sentiment is heartily returned on behalf of our TCS community and students, as we are thrilled that she is here to offer her talents and energy to our team!



## CALENDAR

**NOVEMBER 21ST-23RD**

Thanksgiving Break

**DECEMBER 13TH**

7PM - 8:30PM

Board Meeting

**DECEMBER 7TH**

9AM - 11AM

First Friday Open House

**DECEMBER 24TH - JANUARY 4TH**

Winter Break

**JANUARY 7TH**

Institute Day - No School

**JANUARY 10TH**

7PM - 8:30PM

Board Meeting

**JANUARY 11TH**

9AM - 10:30 AM

First Friday Open House

**JANUARY 21ST**

Martin Luther King Jr. Day

No School

**JANUARY 31ST**

11:30AM

Conferences - Early Dismissal

**FEBRUARY 1ST**

9AM - 10:30 AM

First Friday Open House

**FEBRUARY 1ST**

Conferences - No School

**FEBRUARY 7TH**

7PM - 8:30PM

Board Meeting