

A Lesson Plan for Health and Health Equity



Rendering of West Elementary School, opening 2021

Washington, D.C., is known globally for many facets of its identity, including its role as the nation's capital and a buffet of incredible museums and cultural institutions. But it is also an innovative local community in its own right, demonstrated by the new approach the city's public education system is taking to design healthy spaces within its neighborhood schools.

Architect Andrea Swiatocha, AIA, LEED AP, the deputy chief of facilities of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), is leading this charge on the built environment and health. "Conversations about health outcomes were happening informally and sporadically within different school departments, but I was interested in moving them toward thoughtful — and more concrete — health goals."

Building on her knowledge of rating systems, including LEED, WELL and Fitwel, Swiatocha dove in, reaching out to contacts at the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the U.S. Green Building Council. Seeking more support and partners to add to the conversation, she approached nearby George Washington University (GW) Milken Institute School of Public Health. Then, armed only with a GW intern and a vision, she built a team with representatives across the DCPS system, encouraging more structured conversations about mutual goals and capacities.

“

Conversations about health outcomes were happening informally...but I was interested in moving them toward thoughtful and more concrete health goals”

- Andrea Swiatocha, DCPS

Tanya Eagle, AICP, WELL AP, LEED AP BD+C, is a sustainability specialist working with Perkins Eastman DC, the design firm competitively selected to be a part of the design team for DCPS. Both Eagle and Swiatocha have a passion for health equity and immediately fell into conversations about what this might look like for schools across the District of Columbia.

By hosting workshops and design charrettes with a wide cross-section of DCPS professionals, other D.C. agencies, community members and students, DCPS is bringing multiple professional and firsthand user lenses into

the conversations about “positive learning environments.” For instance, students and teachers from one of the high schools prioritized mental health, citing high levels of stress for students. “As a team,” notes Eagle, “we actively listen to the school community’s concerns and ideas to create healthy indoor and outdoor spaces for students to learn, socialize and feel supported. We consider the qualitative nature of the space, as well as quantitative measures such as daylight, thermal comfort, acoustics and air quality.”

DCPS is also exploring net-zero-energy buildings, indoor environmental quality measures, material health, rooftop school gardens, outdoor classrooms and bike trails, and activating hallways with elements such as floor balance beams and active collaboration spaces. These conversations are creating novel ideas and solutions for important resources: our community members and leaders of tomorrow.



Rendering of West Elementary School learning commons





Conversation guide

Projects and initiatives related to health and health equity in the built environment often start with a conversation between individuals or among small groups. It may be a formal convening led by a foundation or city agency, a workshop at a convention or even coffee between colleagues.

The Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities is engaged in a year-long effort to spur these conversations among our members and beyond. We've compiled stories about discussions that have led to healthy solutions at the community, regional and state levels.

Here are the questions they asked in Washington, DC →



Students, teachers and stakeholders engage in the design process for Banneker High School

WHO'S COME TO THE TABLE SO FAR

- D.C. government agencies
- District of Columbia Public Schools students and staff
- George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health
- Perkins Eastman DC

1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

In 2019, newly in her role as deputy chief of facilities for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Andrea Swiatocha knew that health equity considerations needed to be integral to the redesign of D.C. schools. Initially “spitballing ideas” with her supervisor led to questions such as:

- How do we formalize and put structure around the sporadic and unofficial conversations about health and health equity that are happening at DCPS and at other D.C. agencies?
- What knowledge and expertise can we tap from our networks, including our membership with national associations like the American Institute of Architects or U.S. Green Building Council?

2. BUILDING OUT THE CONVERSATION

Exploring the integration of health equity into new and/or redesigned schools, DCPS officials began to ask who and how they could build the right team of partners:

- How many schools could be considered for the integration of health equity design each year in D.C.?
- What are the criteria we might include in an RFP process for a design firm to incorporate health equity as a core element of its design?
- What partners can we tap in our own city who have expertise in public health issues?
- How do we expand the capacity and public health expertise of our team so that we can have better community engagement?
- How do we design our community workshops and charrettes to best engage students, their families, school staff, school neighbors and other stakeholders to learn about their needs and interests related to health issues?

3. CLOSING THE LOOP

As the planning process continues and DCPS begins to refine school designs, the team is asking:

- Now that we know the school community's priorities around health, how do we address those through specific and feasible building design elements?
- Indoor bike tracks and hallway balance beams are creative ideas, but what is practical and what activities can the school building accommodate?
- How can we incorporate health considerations into all design decisions and measure the effects of those decisions on students, teachers and the broader community?
- How do we keep the community involved and engaged in this process?
- How do we expand our thinking to continuously improve upon what we're building now?
- How do we leverage the success we've had so far into ongoing support from our stakeholders?