



[Back to: News » Home](#)

News

Mass. Art students give Carter School kids more than a place to stay dry

by Brandon Simes
 Managing Editor
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Mayor Menino and Carter School students helped cut the ribbon on Friday at the opening of the school's new bus shelter. (Source:Brandon Simes)

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New bus shelter offers hope, a chance to learn, and cover for Carter School students, principal looking to build a pool next

Staff, students, Mayor Thomas Menino and Boston Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Carol Johnson thanked a team from the Mass. College of Art and Design for designing and building a new bus shelter outside the William E. Carter School, 396 Northampton Street, below bright skies at a ribbon cutting on Friday morning, Sept.

25. The shelter, which connects the bus stop outside to the learning space within the school, offers students a chance to reach out and experience their surroundings under the umbrella of a comfortable, colorful space.

"Once again, the Carter School and its friends have done something here people didn't think could happen," said Menino after the ribbon-cutting presentation ended. "Because of the dedication of this community, the Boston community, the children here at the Carter School are excited to have a beautiful shelter."

"It's unbelievable what this school is all about," he added.

Johnson thanked the group for its work during her time at the podium, addressing the crowd of more than 100.

"On behalf of the entire School Committee, Reverend [Greg] Groover, our chair, and Marchelle Raynor, our vice chair, and all the students and the staff of this community, I just can't thank all of you enough for making it possible for the children, the very special children of the Carter community, and I know the staff appreciate all that you've done to make it possible," she said.

The design funnels water down its sides to create a sensory experience. As rain water drips down the sides of the structure, it pools in buckets and potted plants, giving Carter School students a chance to dip their fingers into the water or simply stay dry, while red, yellow, and blue lights shine down from above. Some are more or less inclined to experiment with water, according to the school's principal, Marianne Kopaczynski.

"The kids respond positively to [water], and at various levels," she said. "Some of the kids are afraid, so we have lower pots that they can dip their hand into it. Other kids are not afraid, and look up, and interact. The colors shine down on the sidewalk at particular times of the day-it's great, I love that. And the sound, they'll hear that, and they'll be dry when they're getting off the bus, so I can't ask for more than that."

Kopaczynski, who said the school and staff don't "usually get gifts without having to stand on [their] heads," praised the students at Mass. College of Art and Design.

"They worked so hard, in the heat and the rain, and never gave up and were positive," she said. "I just-I can't get over it. I'm knocked out by the

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students."

The students exceeded expectations with their work at the site. After initially designing the shelter in three weeks, the group realized it would need to find the funding to make their vision come to fruition, and did that gritty work themselves. They called friends, family, and acquaintances and gathered the necessary supplies.

"We realized that this project meant more than just building someone's residence or something that has a little less meaning to it," explained one of the project's architects, Sean Cummings. "As soon as we met the kids we were all on board, we were going to do whatever it took to make a project that was fitting to their needs, and the needs of the school."

"It transcended a usual class," said James Drysdale, another architect from the Mass. College of Art and Design team.

The rest of the team included Sam Batchelor, Will Betch, Rhea Bundrant, Matthew Hlavinica, Dong Wan Kim, Sarah Mancuso, Amanda Prachanronarong, Jon Schluenz, Erica Squeo, and Laura Watson.

"Everyone seemed to know a little bit of someone and it was just enough to get it done," said Cummings. "It was quite awesome. ... At every little turn, there was like, a light, you know. It was like, step by step. Without everyone's help it wouldn't have been a success."

The design follows the school's philosophy of experiential learning.

"The first thing that these kids are sort of taught, is this idea of sort of reaching out," said Cummings. "The concept is really driven around that idea of the project reaching out to kids who are coming in."

"The tactile, the water stuff, really gets going when it rains, and then there's sound, and they can touch it," added Drysdale. "The key thing is that the water comes under the structure so you're sheltered from the rain."

The students at the Carter School showed their appreciation during the ceremonies by singing and signing their version of "Joy To The World," led by Whittier Street Health Center music therapist Allison Zucca. The verses were rewritten for the occasion with lines such as "We are thankful for the colors shining from the sun/And shelter for everyone" and "When the rain comes down in buckets/We will think of you when we stay dry." Students sitting in the shade of the shelter smiled wide, offering shrieks of applause and gratitude, which brought tears to the eyes of many gathered.

A plot of open space on the school's grounds has Kopaczynski thinking of another ambitious project. The Carter School has no formal auditorium, so she wants to build a two-story structure that would include a first-floor therapeutic pool. The good weather on Friday morning proved more necessary than a stroke of luck, she said, and rain could have put a damper on the entire gathering.

"We need a space like this, so the second floor will be multi-purpose, it'll be a gym, a cafeteria, there's therapy, and an auditorium," she said. "It's just a twinkle in my eye now, it's been a twinkle since 1978 probably, but this time I want to make it happen."

She acknowledged that "there's no money in the government right now," but said through fundraising the project can happen.

"We're going to fundraise and hopefully gain the permission of the school department to do it," she said. "It's important for the students because most of them are trapped in wheelchairs; they cannot move their bodies. And learning comes through movement, through interacting with your environment, so in the pool they're free, [with] the buoyancy. If they make a splash, they have actually impacted the environment. They'll learn there's a cause and effect: I can do something. So everyday aquatic therapy for them wouldn't be too often."

Building the pool on-site would also help because employees wouldn't have to leave the site to travel with certain students, leaving the staff short at the school. Transportation is also a difficult cost to absorb, so the pool could help save money in that regard.

"On-site would be really the way to go," said Kopaczynski. "Just like English and math are part of everybody else's curriculum, the pool-athletic

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therapy-should be theirs."

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