

More Than A Design

**Reflections from the John Eager Howard/Reservoir Hill
School Design Process**

A Community Narrative

A Reservoir Hill Improvement Council and
Healthy Neighborhoods, Inc. publication

by Shannen Coleman Siciliano



More Than a Design

Executive Summary

In 2013 the Maryland General Assembly approved a \$1 billion bond program to finance a major capital improvements program for Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS). With these funds, BCPS launched its “21st Century Schools” program to replace or renovate dozens of schools over a 10-year span. BCPS placed strong emphasis on using this one-time opportunity to engage parents, students, teachers and other community members in making choices about their 21st Century schools.

The community engagement process at John Eager Howard Elementary School has been cited by BCPS administrators as among the most successful in the first tier of schools slated for construction. This report documents the engagement process, identifying elements that led to successful outcomes and significant challenges. While every school and every community is different, the goal of this report is to document lessons learned that can be replicated by other school communities.

This report was commissioned by Healthy Neighborhoods, Inc. with a grant from Enterprise Community Partners, on behalf of Reservoir Hill. It traces the John Eager Howard Elementary School design process from 2011- 2015. This process also included the planning to close and merge Westside Elementary School, located in the Penn North community, with John Eager Howard Elementary. Many of the persons interviewed were members of the John Eager Howard Design Team: community partners, members of the school staff and administration, residents of Reservoir Hill, and parents of John Eager Howard students. The former Westside Community School Coordinator, the Westside principal and State Delegate Antonio Hayes provided insight into the Westside/Penn North closing and merger. Others interviewed for this report included administrators from Baltimore City Public Schools, staff members of community-based organizations that led efforts to organize the school and community, city and state legislators, and project architects. The compilation and synthesis of their interviews provides an historical review for the Reservoir Hill community. In addition, the report seeks to offer insight for future 21st Century Schools communities, schools, partners, organizations, funders and stakeholders for areas of replication and improvement.

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The Reservoir Hill Improvement Council and Healthy Neighborhoods, Inc. are grateful to Enterprise Community Partners for the grant to support this report and for recognizing the importance of community engagement in the school design process.

Elements of Success

Two elements of success were prominent and consistent in interviews for this report:

Relationships

Relationships played an integral role in the success of the school design process. Reservoir Hill Improvement Council (RHIC) and Child First Authority each committed one full-time staff member to establish strong relationships within the school and the neighborhood. The two organizations independently and together worked on campaigns within the school and across the city with the Baltimore Education Coalition to build relationships, organize school and community members to act on issues that impacted the school and move to action. These sustained efforts built trust within the school and community that positively impacted the design process.

Relationships do not evolve by accident. As the John Eager Howard experience shows, both *infrastructure* and *investment* are necessary in order for strategic relationships to be built. RHIC hired Erin Bowman as the School Organizer and Healthy Food Coordinator for John Eager Howard Elementary. This full-time RHIC position, housed at the school, strategically improved relationships between the community and the school by building partnerships to support the school's and neighborhood's greening and wellness goals. At John Eager Howard, Child First Authority hired Jennifer McDowell as the Community School Coordinator, with the goal of strengthening relationships with students and their families and other community partners.

Values and Vision

Another important success factor was building the design process on values and a vision, instead of simply focusing on process itself. The John Eager Howard Design Team established a "school-community-owned" design process that worked in conjunction with Baltimore City Schools, but was not led by Baltimore City Schools. This meant the team created its own process and began organizing and talking to the community ahead of BCPS's established design timeline for 21st Century Schools. Having the infrastructure of two committed organizations also enabled the team to bring its own experts to help the school and community members understand the importance of stories, vision and values of a community when designing a new school building. The team then established a series of listening campaigns, individual meetings, group meetings and community surveys/door knocking campaigns to identify the values and desires of students, parents and school staff as well as community members and partners. Once the values and vision were established, all decisions regarding the design of the school were filtered through the established values of the community.

Strengths

The Community Design Team members identified four areas of strength during the design process for John Eager Howard:

- 1. DEDICATED ORGANIZERS.** Having at least one full-time, dedicated organizer responsible for the design process was key to the success of the outcome. This allowed someone to focus a significant amount of her/his time on developing a team, creating a school-owned process and leading efforts to engage the school and community.
- 2. ENGAGED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP.** An engaged and community-oriented school leader also added to the success at John Eager Howard. Ms. Tamara Hanson, John Eager Howard Elementary School principal, had built a strong working relationship with the community before the 21st Century process began. Once the design process was under way, Ms. Hanson remained engaged and an active part of the planning team and trusted the leadership of those she put in place in her absence.
- 3. ROBUST AND DIVERSE TEAM.** The John Eager Howard School Design Team included a committed, diverse representation of the school and community. Each team member represented an integral part of the school, community or community partner, remained engaged over multiple years and used their expertise and relationships to benefit the process and outcomes for their school. Additional partners included the architects from Cho Benn Holback, who also supported robust community engagement and values; Baltimore City Public Schools and the Baltimore City Planning Department.
- 4. ENGAGEMENT.** Finally, the engagement opportunities that the John Eager Howard team provided emphasized breadth and depth. They utilized school and community events, meeting places and locations to speak with people individually and in small and large groups. The team sought true engagement, more than just a one-time survey, and received feedback from school and community members multiple times.

Challenges

The design team described three major challenges throughout the process.

- 1. SCHOOL SYSTEM CAPACITY.** John Eager Howard Elementary School began its design planning with the first wave of schools in the 21st Century Schools design phase. At that time, only five BCPS staff members were assigned to create and implement the design strategy for City Schools; four of the five were in other

jobs aside from the design work. This created a burden on the 21st Century Schools staff as well as on the team at John Eager Howard.

- 2. SUSTAINING INVOLVEMENT.** The length of the process also challenged the team. It was difficult to sustain involvement and engagement from the Design Team and members of the community during weeks and months when nothing seemed to be happening.
- 3. WESTSIDE ELEMENTARY CLOSURE AND MERGER WITH JOHN EAGER HOWARD.** The closing/merging procedure for Westside Elementary School dramatically impacted how the Penn North community, which adjoins Reservoir Hill, engaged in the design process at John Eager Howard. School and community members grew frustrated over the lack of transparency from Baltimore City Schools, unclear messaging and a late final decision to officially close the school. These factors gave the Westside/Penn North community a false sense of hope that they could organize to stop the closure of their school. Therefore, when Westside community members were asked to participate in meetings regarding design, the focus of those meetings turned to advocating to keep their school open. Those interviewed felt that the decision to close the school reflected yet another decision to disinvest in the already resource strapped community.

Recommendations

The recommendations for replication acknowledge that not all communities will be able to fully replicate the success of the John Eager Howard and Reservoir Hill communities. The following are key factors that the district, schools, communities and partners should consider as they embark to design a new school, improve an existing school, or support the design process of a community. Many require resources committed specifically to the community engagement process.

We recommend that:

- 1. BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS:**
 - recognize the value of community engagement by funding a community schools organizer in each 21st Century School;
 - create a timeline that allows ample time for schools, communities, architects and partners to prepare for public meetings;
 - encourage and train principals to engage with community members and partners, while also providing significant time in their schedules to do so;

- work with public and private funding sources and the Family League of Baltimore to expand Community Schools and allow the Community School Coordinator to help lead the design process at his/her respective school;
- restructure the timeline for school closures so that school communities have opportunities to offer feedback and learn about future options and student relocation before the decision to close a school is made; and
- create a process, with other city agencies, for community input to develop a plan for the use of the closing school buildings.

2. SCHOOL PLANNING TEAMS:

- consider developing and owning a design process that suits the needs of the school and surrounding community, and
- build robust relationships with community partners and organizations prior to the design process.

3. BALTIMORE'S MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL:

- seek sufficient funding to support community redevelopment and investment for the neighborhoods surrounding closing schools, not just the communities receiving a new/renovated school building.

4. PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FUNDERS:

- invest in long-term community infrastructure and ensure that neighborhoods and schools have at minimum a part-time community organizer (if not a community school coordinator);
- support neighborhood outreach and organizer training; and
- recognize the importance of strong curriculum once schools are built by providing sufficient support to develop high-quality instruction.

5. COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS:

- provide support and organizer training for any staff member leading efforts as a community school coordinator or organizer, working in a community or school to help facilitate the design process;
- collaborate with other community based organizations that work in the same school or community;
- develop a mutually beneficial relationship with the school community and its leadership well in advance of the school design process; and
- develop partnerships with foundations and corporations to invest economic and human resources that support strong, innovative school curriculum.

Purpose

This community narrative examines how parents, community residents, and other partners became engaged in the 21st Century School Design process at John Eager Howard Elementary School in Reservoir Hill, which has been cited by Baltimore City Public Schools administrators as a model. The report also reflects on the initial process of closing Westside Elementary School, in the adjoining Penn North neighborhood, and merging it with John Eager Howard.

The sponsors of this report, Healthy Neighborhoods, Inc. and the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council, expect that this documented history will provide a roadmap for successful engagement of school communities as they engage in the 21st Century School Design process.

The report provides a well-rounded perspective of key individuals engaged in the school design process. The narrative is drawn from interviews with members of the John Eager Howard core team (John Eager Howard staff members, Reservoir Hill residents and Reservoir Hill partners), staff members and supporters from Westside Elementary School, Reservoir Hill Improvement Council and Child First Authority staff members, and key partners from Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) and other community-based organizations. The narrative does not embody the views of entire schools, organizations or communities.

Context



“The school was on the chopping block and RHIC organized to keep it open.”

Too Many, Too Old

Like many cities in the East and Midwest, Baltimore has seen its population decline steadily over the past 50 years. Similarly, enrollment in Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) fell from a peak of 193,000 in 1969 to 82,354 in January 2017. As a result, the inventory of school buildings, created for a larger student population, was underutilized. The facilities were also aging; in 2015, only three percent were less than 30 years old, and 23 percent were more than 60 years old.

To control costs, BCPS has made decisions to close some schools and consolidate their students into a smaller number of buildings. Frequently these decisions have been met with angry protests from the communities slated to lose their neighborhood schools.

In 2005, John Eager Howard Elementary School in Reservoir Hill was on the list of schools to be closed. This spurred the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council (RHIC), the community's primary advocacy group, to launch the “Better Schools Initiative.”

“The school was on the chopping block and RHIC organized to keep it open,” said Rick Gwynallen, RHIC Associate Executive Director. More than 250 residents attended community meetings on the issue and many others knocked on doors, attended city-wide planning meetings about facility needs and closings, and took part in ongoing advocacy. The community organizing was successful in keeping the school open. One consequence of this success was the start of a relationship of trust and mutual necessity between the school and the community organization.

Between 2005 and 2010, RHIC continued to deepen its relationship with John Eager Howard, seeing the success of the school as an important ingredient for the success of the neighborhood. Despite RHIC's organizing history with the school, Mr. Gwynallen recalled that parents at the school didn't always feel connected with RHIC, which was different than the neighborhood/block associations they knew. (RHIC had begun in the 1990s as an umbrella group to unite the many block clubs in the community around shared goals and to speak for the community with one voice.) According to Gwynallen, **“RHIC had the best intentions, but the fact is we just didn't have the staff capacity at that time to be consistently present. Parents at the school lived in the community, but they didn't see the neighborhood association as part of their immediate interest.”** The only way to build the partnership effectively, Mr. Gwynallen concluded, was to have a full-time staff member placed at the school to build school/community projects and school/community bonds of trust.

A Coalition for Schools

As financial difficulties continued to burden BCPS year after year, a coalition emerged to argue for a systemic change. The Baltimore Education Coalition (BEC) formed in 2009 to mobilize Baltimore residents and organizations to advocate for more funding and effective reform for Baltimore schools. The founding partners included Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), the Child First Authority (CFA), City Neighbors Charter School and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). BEC's focus was at the state level, where in 2009 its efforts succeeded in blocking \$23 million in cuts to BCPS funding. BEC fended off more proposed cuts in 2010. In 2011, backed by an intensive education and mobilization campaign in school communities, it not only blocked \$15 million in proposed cuts but ended the session with a \$3 million increase in state funds for city schools.

A former RHIC organizer, Frank Patinella, was the ACLU's senior advocate for education reform and served on the leadership board of the BEC. Rick Gwynallen of RHIC stayed in contact with Mr. Patinella and followed the creation of BEC. Knowing the importance of school investments for community revitalization, he felt that RHIC should get involved, too. "We made a shift in 2009/2010," he said. "We went from this neighborhood school focus to the idea that we weren't going to get what we wanted for the neighborhood school without a large [citywide] campaign. Because the ACLU was already taking this step... we attached ourselves to that very quickly." In 2010, RHIC officially joined the BEC, the first neighborhood organization to do so.

By 2011, BEC had centered on a new strategy: Find a way to fund a massive increase in capital funding for school facilities. What developed was Transform Baltimore, a campaign to convince state elected officials to fund the renovation or replacement of every school building in Baltimore within 10 years. Transform Baltimore created a broader coalition with additional parents, schools, unions, churches, corporations, foundations, and other community groups joining the effort. BCPS, for its part, embarked on a 21st Century School Buildings Plan. BCPS commissioned a detailed study of all its school buildings, known as the Jacobs Report, which concluded that the price for bringing every existing facility up to a satisfactory learning environment was \$2.4 billion.

In response to the Transform Baltimore campaign and to the Jacobs Report, the Maryland General Assembly approved bond financing in 2013 to generate \$1 billion for school building replacement or renovation over 10 years. The funding bill also required Baltimore City Public Schools to increase its utilization rate - in other words, to close some schools while rebuilding others.

Organizing in School: RHIC

In 2011, RHIC made a major commitment to John Eager Howard Elementary by dedicating a full-time staff member, Erin Bowman, to serve as RHIC School Organizer and Healthy Food Coordinator. Ms. Bowman, who was located in the school, used her position to merge school greening initiatives with neighborhood-wide wellness strategies. She initiated a healthy-cooking class with students aged 10-14 at the Recreation Center, brought the Whitelock Community Farm into the school via Farm Club and the Mobile Market, and strategically built partnerships to support the school's and neighborhood's greening and wellness goals. Students were able to cook nutritious meals with food grown at the farm in their community, sell produce at the school and walk to the farm.

Ms. Bowman saw her efforts as building on a long tradition in Reservoir Hill. "RHIC had been around for a long time," she said. **"The neighborhood had also been organizing for many years, so people in the neighborhood were used to meeting and talking. It wasn't like we had to build that culture [in the neighborhood]. We needed to bring that culture to the school."**

Residents asked RHIC to create an after-school program, but RHIC knew that was outside of its expertise. Instead, RHIC supported the application of the Child First Authority (CFA) to establish an after-school program and operate John Eager Howard as a community school. CFA, like RHIC, was rooted in community organizing; it had been created in 1996 by Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), the most effective grassroots organizing group in Baltimore, to pressure city schools to provide after-school services in every school. The addition of Child First supported RHIC's efforts.

Organizing in School: Child First Authority

While an organizing culture existed in the community, Child First provided an opportunity to bring this culture inside of the school building, while also operating a unique after-school program. In 2011, Child First received a grant for an AmeriCorps VISTA to organize at John Eager Howard. Jennifer McDowell, who served in this role, created a school organizing team to address issues raised by the school and neighboring community. She also facilitated the planning for an after-school program. In 2012 she moved seamlessly from her AmeriCorps VISTA position to become CFA's community school coordinator at John Eager Howard.

Ms. McDowell's initial goals were to deepen the relationships already established and create synergies that did not yet exist. Essentially, her work provided an opportunity for the relationships within the school to extend into the community, building on the infrastructure created by RHIC. Child First also assigned a school organizer, Jimmy Stuart, to John Eager Howard to bring a systems focus to the relationship and additional layers of Child First support.

A Child First school core team developed that consisted of parents and staff members. After a series of relational meetings and conversations, the core team identified two concerns to tackle: poor lighting in the back of the school building, and vacant portable buildings that created eyesores and invited unsafe activity. These two issues would become campaign platforms for the core team, and an improvement campaign was launched.

The lighting in the back of the school was so poor that the core team organized a group of parents who would rotate "light duty" for after-school dismissal. Parents would gather with flashlights and/or park their cars in the back of the school with their headlights on so that families and students could safely leave the building at night. Eventually, the core team met with Keith Scroggins, Chief Operating Officer of City Schools, to express its concerns. Mr. Scroggins heard the message and lights were installed at the back of the building. The core team had scored a win!

Another of the core team's concerns, the unused school portable, warranted attention. "The portable hadn't been used in decades, housed old files and blocked the view for watching kids walk up and down the street," Ms. McDowell said. "It also created an alcove for drug use and was filled with what looked like bullet holes. It was old and had no purpose. Parents and staff members wanted it removed!" The core team created a strategy to get the portable removed and it enlisted RHIC to help. Ms. Tamara Hanson, principal of John Eager Howard, called Baltimore City Schools Central Office and Rick Gwynallen at RHIC helped to draft a letter. Faster than predicted, the portable was removed from the school site during the summer of 2013. "The portable removal was such a visual win. It energized the team. But, more importantly, parents on our team and Ms. Hanson developed a strong, working relationship because they worked side by side for these school wins," explained Ms. McDowell. **"Gaining respect and recognition from the community over a period of time, that put us in a great position to build in the engagement that we wanted from the [school design] process,"** Carol Reckling, former Executive Director of Child First, described.

Setting the Stage for Engagement

A few months after the \$1 billion schools construction program was approved by the Maryland General Assembly, Baltimore City Public Schools announced a list of the first 11 schools to be renovated or replaced. Michael Sarbanes, then Director of Engagement for BCPS, made a convincing case that the school design processes should reflect the wishes and concerns of each school community. Nicole Price, who worked in the Office of Engagement and then on the 21st Century Schools team, noted that "Michael Sarbanes [committed] to opening the process and making sure that the buildings were not built without input from the community. Also, the interim CEO, Tisha Edwards, and the [Baltimore City Schools] board [were] open to the vision that he laid out."

John Eager Howard Elementary was on the list of first-tier school construction projects – in part, as a result of its visibility and advocacy in the citywide Transform Baltimore Campaign. According to Carol Reckling, then Executive Director of Child First, **"From the beginning, having some of the press conferences at JEH, having people aware that this school was in need of significant change, was helpful. I think that's part of what determined it would be in the first group of schools to be rebuilt. That and the condition of the school."**

Being part of a citywide effort enabled the school and community to build deeper relationships across the city and the state. Jimmy Stuart, the Child First Organizer at John Eager Howard, also served as the BEC Co-Chair.

Bebe Verdery, Director of the Maryland Education Reform Project at ACLU, believes that, "For John Eager [Howard] and others at the school, to have the context and the connection [to the] citywide effort, they [better] understood the origin of the plan, they helped push the plan, and they created expectations of community engagement." Furthermore, Ms. Verdery explained that having leaders from RHIC and Child First work alongside citywide advocates and serve on Baltimore City Schools' 21st Century Buildings Plan Steering Committee, meant that the school system was not John Eager Howard's only source of information; RHIC and Child First helped make strategic decisions and gained information firsthand. "Rick was coming to meetings with Transform Baltimore and [we discussed] how do we make the whole neighborhood transformation work? What else can we leverage aside from just a school? RHIC connected neighborhoods with the school," she said. Barbara Aylesworth, Senior Program Officer of Healthy

Neighborhoods, reiterated that so many saw the 21st Century Buildings Plan as “the key to the city's success.” She continued, **“It was transformative for neighborhoods, for kids, for the city. RHIC recognized that the future of the neighborhood hinged on this huge development project”**

Leading the Charge

The organizing efforts of the Reservoir Hill community and John Eager Howard allowed Baltimore City Public Schools and legislators to witness the extent of engagement among the school and neighborhood members. This level of engagement happened before BCPS announced the schools that would be part of the building process. John Eager Howard was well-positioned to be a prototype school.

The organizing work that happened for the Baltimore Education Coalition/Transform Baltimore campaign further nurtured the respect and recognition from the Reservoir Hill community, which placed John Eager Howard in a great position to build on the engagement for the next step in the process. The citywide opportunities for students and families to engage made the design process matter to families, Ms. Bowman believes. “If we didn’t have smaller, exciting things along the way, people wouldn’t have believed us that it mattered,” said Ms. Bowman. Mr. Stuart, former Child First Community Organizer and BEC Co-Chair, vividly described a sea of John Eager Howard parents, students and community members in the front row at a BEC rally in Annapolis during the spring of 2013, right before the funding for the 21st Century Buildings Plan passed at the Maryland General Assembly. Mr. Stuart felt that the John Eager Howard/Reservoir Hill team had “that energy [of], ‘Because I fought for it, I’m getting to see it come,’” which laid the foundation for the design team engagement.

So when BCPS announced that John Eager Howard would be among the first tier of schools to be renovated or replaced, Child First and RHIC were organized and ready to go. Ms. Bowman and Ms. McDowell had built relationships within the school and the community, which formed the basis for creating the School Design Team. They also were comfortable teaming with each other.

Child First Authority

Child First Authority’s mission is to develop youth by strengthening and reforming schools. With its emphasis on high expectations, Child First Authority (Child First) was created to: (1) organize high quality, school-owned out of school time and day-school programs in City schools and (2) organize parents, school staff, and community partners to act on their vision of positive outcomes for youth, their schools, families, and communities.

Its founding partner, Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development (BUILD), established Child First in 1996 as a result of a two-year community organizing campaign. In hundreds of meetings conducted one-on-one and in large and small groups, citizens expressed the need for safety, academic achievement, and opportunity for children and youth in Baltimore.

Child First is committed to partnering with schools and community-based organizations to develop a continuum of services that give students and families the opportunities and services they need to be successful. Staying true to its foundation, the heart of Child First’s work is a network of relationships that foster trust and collaboration with partner schools, parents and communities. Through these relationships, school communities identify their interests and needs and develop the skills to create real change through action.

In response to the needs of local school communities and Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS), Child First has created several signature programs and initiatives including: highly rated, academically engaging after-school programs; quality summer programs; High Expectations, a high school youth intervention initiative; and was a co-founding organization for the Baltimore Education Coalition, a citywide collaborative effort to protect funding and act on problems facing Baltimore’s schools. Child First also serves as the Lead Agency for seven Baltimore City Community Schools.

Community Schools are a strategy to remove barriers to student success by providing supports that address the needs of students, their families, and their communities. A successful Community School, with the leadership of one of Child First’s on-site Community School Coordinators, makes the school a hub of the community. Specifically, Community School Coordinators focus on implementing partnerships and strategies to: increase school attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism; improve the school climate by creating a welcoming environment where families feel known and valued, and reducing school suspensions and repeat suspensions; and increase family engagement and community volunteerism in activities that support the school and student success.

The Process Unfolds



“Without a vision for something different and better [people] get used to stuff and you don’t see ‘the bad’ anymore... that’s dangerous!”

Beginning with a Vision

During the fall of 2012 the Baltimore Education Coalition’s campaign for school facilities funding took shape. Organizations knew that without funding, new schools for Baltimore would remain a dream. To help win this campaign, RHIC and Child First thought about ways to engage and organize their base while advocating for funding. In prepping for the legislative session, Child First decided its schools would need to focus on a vision for future new school buildings. Without a vision for something different and better, Ms. Reckling explained, “[people] get used to stuff and you don’t see ‘the bad’ anymore... That’s dangerous!”

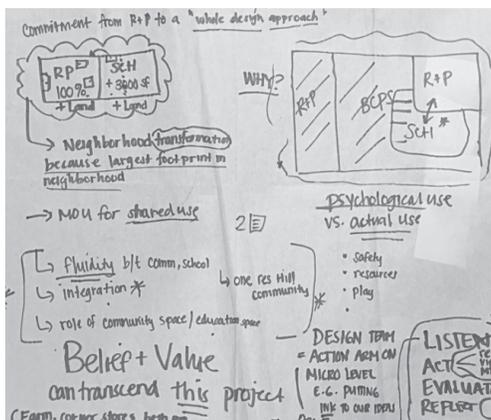
Child First Authority invited John Boecker to speak to its staff members. Mr. Boecker, an architect from Pennsylvania, is known for designing schools based on community storytelling and community engagement, a process he calls integrative design. Ms. McDowell brought Ms. Bowman to join the meeting. Mr. Boecker discussed the idea of a “story within a place” when thinking about architecture. Ms. McDowell recalled, “Boecker said that architects can gain the story of a place by conducting a listening campaign, listening to hundreds of residents in a community.” Ms. Bowman felt that the staff at John Eager Howard also needed to hear from Mr. Boecker and RHIC invited him to speak to Reservoir Hill residents and members of John Eager Howard.

Mr. Boecker met with Reservoir Hill residents and parents and staff of John Eager Howard Elementary to take a walking tour of the neighborhood. Together, the group identified community strengths and recognized areas for improvement. Mr. Gwynallen

reflected that John Boecker’s visit to Reservoir Hill **“opened people’s minds about how one can participate in the design process without being a professional. It excited parents and neighbors!”** Expectations were raised; the goal of a new school building moved beyond clean halls, new desks and new bathroom stalls. For Reservoir Hill and John Eager Howard Elementary, planning for a new school building meant reimagining their community and bringing a set of shared community values to life through design.

Inviting a nationally known architect does not happen automatically. Having an infrastructure of community based organizations with extensive relationships and staff allowed the team to think differently. This infrastructure allowed the community to plan, think strategically and move ahead of the processes in place at City Schools. After Boecker’s visit, before winning money for school construction and before John Eager Howard knew it would receive

funding for renovation or new construction, Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman eagerly got to work. They planned methods for the community to build a set of values and establish a vision for a future school building.



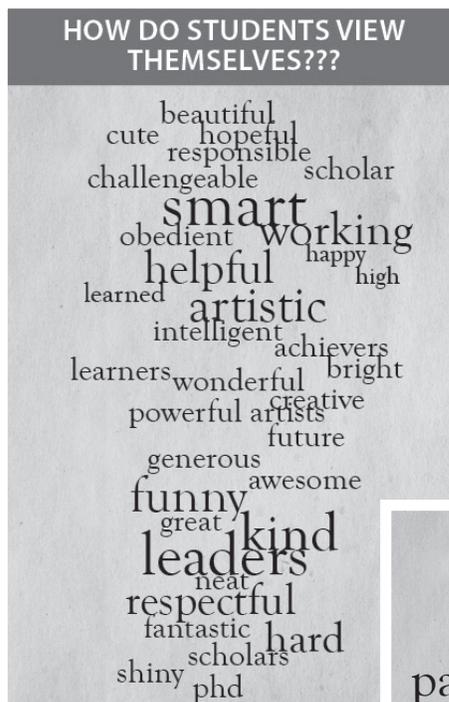
Notes from Jennifer McDowell and Erin Bowman's initial planning about vision and design prior to bringing together the design team.

They held visioning and values meetings at the school and within the Reservoir Hill community to get school and community members excited about the possibility of a new school building. According to Bowman, "It's important to say that we wouldn't have had people organized to win the money [for school construction] unless people were excited about the vision!" Starting in the spring of 2013, they capitalized on already-planned events where school and community members were engaged and added a visioning and values session to these events. Such events included: John Eager Howard's monthly Friday morning breakfasts and seasonal Coffee and Conversations to chat with parents, grade-level and school-wide staff meetings to talk to teachers and school personnel, back-to-school nights to reach parents and students, and periodic events within Reservoir Hill where community members gathered.

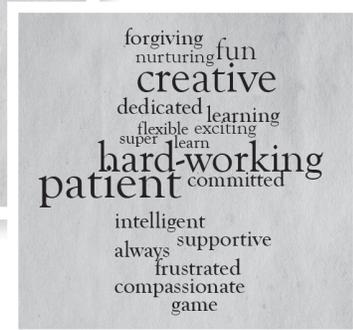
During the various visioning and values meetings, these similar questions were asked of the group. Attendees were asked to complete "I Am Statements."

- I am: _____
- To be my best, I need: _____
- My teachers are (asked to students)/my students are (asked to school faculty and staff)/the students at John Eager Howard are (asked to Reservoir Hill Community members): _____
- To be their best, they need: _____

After the General Assembly approved funding for the 21st Century Buildings Plan, Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman used the visioning and values sessions to identify team members to make up the design team for the school. They recalled leaders who stood out, people who had deep connections to an institution or part of the community in Reservoir Hill, those who had great insight and perspective, and individuals who openly shared their interest but also thought broadly enough to impact the broader school and community. Baltimore City Schools had not announced the timeline or school construction order, yet Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman knew that at some point a team would need to be established. They both agreed that there was no reason to wait. According to Nicole Price, former Director of Engagement for Baltimore City Schools, **"The John Eager Howard Design Team did not wait for City Schools' assigned meetings. They owned their process!"**



Wordles created from the "I Am Statements"



Before team members helped the community move through a visioning, values and input process, Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman recognized the importance of re-envisioning and reimagining for the Design Core Team members. To help residents think "outside the box" and beyond limitations, the team needed to do the same. Before the first core team meeting, Ms. Bowman recalls driving around Baltimore with Ms. McDowell and lamenting,

"We don't know where to have this! We didn't want to have it at the school." Ms. Bowman continued, "We didn't want the future school to feel that institutional way and so we wanted each meeting to be in a space that spoke to what we were trying to build!" They held the first team meeting at Ms. Bowman's house.

Additional visioning sessions were held and extended to the team members' networks and relationships within Reservoir Hill and at the school. The team continued visioning sessions, while also incorporating small group meetings, one-on-one relational meetings, surveys and door-knocking campaigns. After more than

John Eager Howard ES

Goals and Objectives

SCHOOL MISSION

JEH aims to be a community school in which teachers teach to meet the holistic needs of scholars and scholars learn through exposure and experience what is important for them to be lifelong learners in a global workforce.

SCHOOL MOTTO

"Preparing our scholars to be college and career ready while servicing our families... by any means necessary."

School Vision

SCHOOL DESIGN PROCESS GOALS

Principles of the community engagement and school design process:

- We believe that Beliefs & Values precede design.
- In order to get to Beliefs & Values we need breadth and depth.

Goals of process:

- So that Design process leads to school & neighborhood transformation
- And that the product of the design (the building itself) is something that all potential staff, families, neighbors, and partners own.

Design Vision

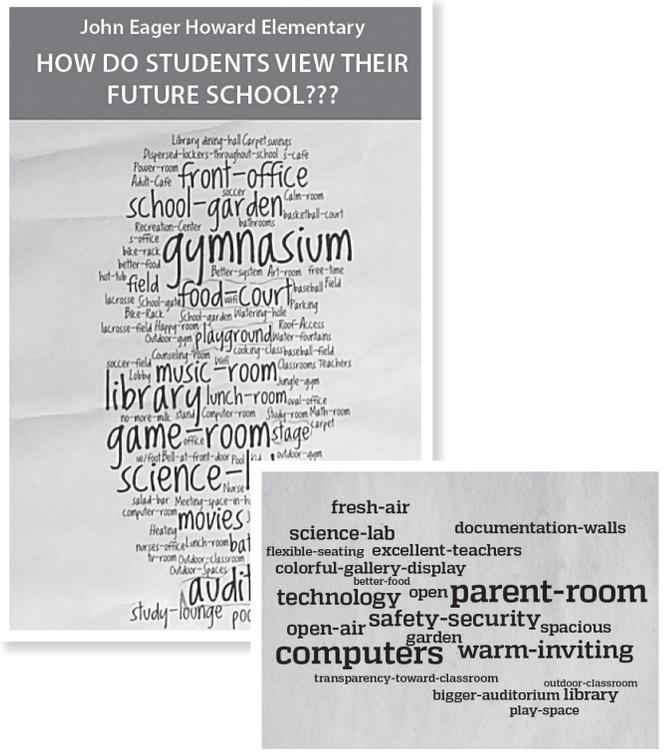
DESIGN VALUES EXTRACTED FROM LISTENING CAMPAIGN

- family, home, connections
- circles, circular spaces are embracing, like a hug
- no two students are the same - each has ability to realize his/her true potential
- no matter what, each student can be successful
- school should feel good, welcoming, warm to all parties who enter
- want students to have exposure to spaces that maximize academic achievement - real science lab, music room, art studio
- current space/school doesn't feel like "we belong here." Want to create a school where there is a real sense of belonging for all - students, teachers, parents
- teachers are human beings too - have personal needs for communication, support, space. The school should be designed to accommodate this vision.
- school should be an oasis in the community - our families deal with all kinds of chaos outside. School should represent calm, a retreat from this chaos.
- classrooms should be inviting for parents; easy to come in and participate without disturbing the flow - TRANSPARENCY
- parents want to be able to check in on their kids in classes without opening the door.
- students value spaces that meet their holistic needs (academic, emotional, social, physical, mental, creative) with an emphasis on creative and physical spaces in addition to untraditional-school spaces such as movies, game room, fun room, happy room, and kids' cafe

This document became the guiding document for the entire design process.

450 conversations with school and community members, the values and vision for a new school were synthesized and created. (See page 10 for what became the guiding document for the entire design process.)

The official Baltimore City Schools 21st Century Design Process began in the late fall of 2013. During the initial phases, Baltimore City Schools assigned the architecture firm Cho Benn Holback & Associates (CBHA) to John Eager Howard to complete the feasibility study/initial set of architectural plans for the new school building. The vision and values established by the school and community translated easily into a design blueprint. Cho Benn Holback Architect Mark Nook explained that the Design Core Team “include[ed input from] the students, neighbors, faculty, administrators. They did Wordles where they took all that information and put it in a computer program.” The Wordles helped to identify key words and themes that were important to community members’ input. “We used those as architects,” he exclaimed. **“You saw ‘healthy eating habits’...so that begins to inform you when we focus on the cafeteria. Or when you see something like quiet learning spaces or open collaborative learning spaces, we can start to say, ‘Ok, here’s what that means from the words to 3-dimensional space.’”** Teachers were also forward thinking, according to the architects, and able to think about what kind of spaces they would want to teach in five or ten years from now.



Mr. Nook explained that the community **“brought ideas and they didn’t know necessarily how it would work, but they weren’t shy in saying, ‘Here’s something that I thought. Hey architects, how can this happen?’”** The John Eager Howard design team also vetted any ideas shared by the architects with the established values of the community.

The Cho Benn Holback Architects described a number of ways that the values of the community were reflected in the design of the school:

- The school and community valued the arts and school/community art-centered gatherings. That informed the need to maintain the school’s auditorium, which meant that the community wanted a renovation over new construction that would have eliminated the auditorium.
- Shared school and community space repeatedly surfaced as a top value. The architects designed the entry of the school to resemble a community square in the front of the building, reaching out to North Ave. **“We could see school activity happening there that had a presence in the community. We could see community activities happening there that had a presence in the school,”** explained Joe Cellucci, CBHA Project Manager.
- The Design Core Team was able to translate student desires like arcades and swimming pools to mean that students wanted additional space and time for play and exercise, which were incorporated into the design.
- Physical health and activity surfaced as another important desire and value. CBHA designed a floor tile pattern so that orange tiles are placed every 10 steps supporting staff members to easily track how many steps they take in subtle ways.
- Safety was important for the school and community members. The community recognized a vacant, crime-prone part of the neighborhood with a liquor store on the corner. A footpath cut through the school yard directly to the liquor store. This concern informed the architects to design the school in an “L” shape so that community members have to walk around the building and no longer cut through the school. “Someone says, ‘This is a problem.’ We as the architects say, ‘Without building walls and fences, we can fix this,’” Mr. Nook said.

Identified Strengths



“A good school can definitely make a neighborhood.”

Reservoir Hill Improvement Council and the Child First Authority brought a history of building relationships and organizing throughout the school and community, coupled with a strong vision and value. That history created a strong foundation for the team. Throughout interviews, dominant themes highlighting strengths and challenges emerged.

Dedicated Organizer(s) to Help Guide the Process

Hiring at least one dedicated, full time organizer to guide the design project significantly contributes to the success of the process

With every interview conducted, the same sentiment emerged, “This work could not have been done without Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman or someone like them.” Both RHIC and Child First invested in key, full-time positions within the school, which made all the difference. “It’s important that [RHIC] had an organizer on the ground early to support infrastructure in the school and community,” said Mr. Gwynallen. Even with limited funds, he insisted that RHIC invest in school organizing. He feels that school organizing, “is the only thing we do that will absolutely produce a huge return on investment. **A good school can definitely make a neighborhood.**” He believes that communities, organizations and funders need to decide that school organizing work matters. “Community [partners have] to make the call that

this is fundamentally important to the idea that [schools are] the way the neighborhood develops.” Frank Patinella, ACLU Senior Advocate for the Education Reform Project, witnessed multiple communities engaged in the design planning process. Mr. Patinella believes, “communities or schools that have capacity of having a CBO or partner in the school, that has staff, who can dedicate time to this, fare better.” Strategy and implementation are different, said Nicole Price. Ms. Price acknowledges that schools need to establish core teams for the design projects, but in the absence of a community school coordinator or another organizer on staff, who will build the teams?

While both Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman spent a significant amount of time on the school design process, they had other roles in the school. **“It was important that people saw us doing other stuff in the school. Not just focused on school design,”** said Ms. Bowman. Accomplishing other projects throughout the school expanded the relationships that Ms. Bowman and Ms. McDowell built, as well as created a level

of trust, especially within the school. This level of trust also poured into the community. Courtney Bettle, a Reservoir Hill community member and member of the School Design Core Team, observed that having persons lead the work who were invested in the school and community but not necessarily a resident also added to an additional level of trust for the John Eager Howard design team. Ms. Bettle believes “neighborhood residents should be included but not facilitating the process. It’s important for diffusing politics.” School and community members interviewed never questioned Ms. Bowman’s and Ms. McDowell’s motives. Had a long term, community association office-holder and or politically-engaged community member led the process, this might not have been true. Mr. Gwynallen noted that this work would be extremely difficult to continue if it depended on a neighborhood volunteer.

Aside from the roles and responsibilities assigned to Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman, they both embraced trying new ideas. Their respective organizations dedicated resources and time for these leaders to focus some of their time on school design but also provided the freedom and flexibility to do so. The school administration, namely John Eager Howard principal Ms. Hanson, also fully supported their work and process. This support further inspired a deeper commitment to creating a process that worked best for all involved; this translated to creating a process that operated in alignment with City Schools’ design process but not bound or restricted to its guidelines.

The John Eager Howard Design Team worked ahead of the school district’s process and recommended its own approach. “When we saw the timeline of meetings for City Schools, we knew the meetings outlined wouldn’t be enough to accomplish what we wanted to accomplish,” said Ms. McDowell. The John Eager Howard design team met every other week for over a year. Ms. McDowell, Ms. Bowman and Mr. Stuart met weekly to synthesize information and plan for upcoming team, school and community meetings. While some school communities only met when meetings were proposed on the City Schools timeline, Ms. Price noted that John Eager Howard’s team “didn’t wait for us.” She added, “They did what they thought was in the best interest of their school community.” Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman led the school’s Design Core Team to identify desired outcomes from proposed City Schools meetings, and they came prepared to even lead City Schools meetings. “We knew that we needed to get ahead of the [City Schools] meetings. We wanted to guide our process and for City Schools to listen. Not the other way around,” said Ms. McDowell.

Engaged School Leadership

School leaders should prioritize the design planning process and actively engage with leaders and community members.

The importance of an engaged principal emerged from conversations with team members and partners as a strength in John Eager Howard Elementary and a necessity for other schools embarking on this process. A school leader must embrace and welcome true community involvement and engagement from a variety of stakeholders. In order for this to occur, Mr. Gwynallen noted the importance of the support from the school district as well. “The district should provide a school leader with support. School leaders should be able to step out, do what is best for their school community, without needing the permission to do so.” He further explained that if school systems provide the support for leaders to move out of their comfort zone and move beyond the walls of the school to support neighborhood campaigns and organizing, most leaders would do so.

Ms. Hanson, the principal at John Eager Howard Elementary School, fully embraced the values necessary to guide a school through the design process. She arrived at John Eager Howard Elementary in 2010-2011 school year. Her arrival, as interim managing principal, created significant change in the culture that existed within the school. Early on, she felt that in order to advance the vision established for the school, she would need to rely on volunteers and community partners. She explained that finding the right match for partners is key. “You want to find partners that support the mission and the vision of the work in the school. But then you also [need to] match what the schools need with what the partners need.”

A principal should have the ability to relate to everyone within their school community: students, staff members, administrators, parents and external partners. Ms. Hanson worked side by side with key personnel and external partners to support the school and community organizing efforts and ultimately the school design process. In doing so, many discussed her ability to engage and lead when necessary but also step back to allow others to lead and own the work that needed to be accomplished. Mr. Stewart observed that Ms. Hanson “had a strong vision for engaging parents and what she wanted it to look like and didn’t want it to look like.” She shared that vision with the rest of the team, then allowed them to execute in a way that made sense to them.

Ms. Hanson remained part of the core team, even if she couldn't attend every meeting. Paula Jones, John Eager Howard School Social Worker, explained, **"If your school leader is not 100% on board, that can make a major difference. She must want what's in the best interest of the students and the families in that community. Again, they're not permanent. They're going to be gone at some point... But that building! That building and those services [are] going to be there forever!"** Ms. Hanson agreed. "Principals need to be a part of this process... Sometimes we have so much on our plate and the demands are great from the system. We tend to look at other things like, 'Oh, well it doesn't matter to me. Put those kind of floors in the cafeteria! No! It really does matter. Every intricate detail should have [a principal's input] behind it!' Not all principals can handle the additional demands, explained Ms. Reckling. "The system should take that into consideration. It takes a certain kind of vision, leadership and positivity to do this work!"

Robust Team and Partners

Diverse team members and dedicated partners provide additional support and perspective that contribute to a successful design planning process.

As noted earlier, values and vision meetings helped Ms. McDowell and Ms. Bowman identify key leaders within the school and in the community who would become part of the School Design Core Team. Ms. McDowell noted that she took lessons from community organizing training she received from BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development) and the Industrial Areas Foundation. "Every meeting was an action, with a purpose. We weren't just collecting information." Mr. Stuart expounded on the process used to identify partners. We asked, "What are the major institutions in the community? How are they related to each other? Who's going to go talk to these institutions? What are we trying to get each of them to do? [We] really tried to build something that was complete, in terms of a team."

They invited leaders to join the team who emerged from relationships with RHIC; veteran community members, younger residents/families with young children, RHIC board members who were connected to anchor institutions. They also looked at leaders that emerged from the school through the school organizing work accomplished with Child First and relationships that emerged since Ms. Bowman and Ms. McDowell were part of the school. This

included school administration and staff members and a parent of a current John Eager Howard student. Robyn Williams, a Reservoir Hill resident and parent of a John Eager Howard student, said she was surprised she was approached to be part of the team. "I really wanted to help out and be part of the team, but I told Jennifer, 'I don't know a thing about architecture!' Once Jennifer explained why I didn't need to be an expert, I felt really comfortable being part of the team." According to Ms. Williams, the team "had a lot of synergy." "We all just seemed to click!" said Don Akchin, a member of Beth Am Synagogue and member of the John Eager Howard School Design Core Team. "We had a lot of capable people [on the team]."

Members of the School Design Core Team included:

- **Don Akchin:** Chair "In For Of" at Beth Am Synagogue;
- **Courtney Bettie:** Newer Reservoir Hill resident, young-non school age children, worked as the Special Assistant to the Director of Engagement at City Schools;
- **Jonathan Bettie:** Newer Reservoir Hill resident, young-non school age children, RHIC Board of Directors;
- **Justin Kuk:** Reservoir Hill resident, young non-school aged children, board member of Whitelock Community Farm;
- **Tamara Hanson:** Principal at John Eager Howard since 2010;
- **Paula Jones:** Social worker at John Eager Howard since 2012;
- **Cindy Paradies:** Member of Beth Am Synagogue;
- **Carol Shulman:** Member of Beth Am Synagogue;
- **Robyn Williams:** Long standing Reservoir Hill resident, parent of John Eager Howard student;
- **Jennifer McDowell:** Child First Authority Community School Coordinator; and
- **Erin Bowman:** RHIC School Organizer and Healthy Food Coordinator.

Reservoir Hill Improvement Council and Child First staff members who supported the team:

- **Rick Gwynallen:** Associate Executive Director at Reservoir Hill Improvement Council;
- **Carol Reckling:** Executive Director at Child First Authority; and
- **Jimmy Stuart:** Community Organizer at Child First Authority, Co-Chair of the Baltimore Education Coalition.

In addition to a robust School Design Core Team, John Eager Howard worked with an architecture firm that closely aligned with its process for listening and engagement with the community. Baltimore City Schools assigned Cho Benn Holback and Associates (CBHA), a Baltimore architecture firm that honors community and a history of location as well as meaningful collaboration, to work with John Eager Howard. Architects Joe Cellucci, Mark Nook

and the CBHA team have received much-deserved praise for this project, the process they implemented. The firm's approach and their collaboration with the team, school and community deserves replication by other architecture firms.

John Eager Howard's School Design Team and Cho Benn Holback and Associates prioritized community engagement. Mark Nook explained that Baltimore City Schools "knew our reputation as an architecture firm and our outreach to communities... [and that we are] a firm that really promotes and takes outreach seriously and transforms that into architecture." According to Mr. Akchin, "It was clear that [Cho Benn Holback was] listening and that they understood what it was that we were trying to say...

It's tempting for people who have advanced education to ignore people who don't. That was not the case here; they really had seen what we were trying to say even though we really didn't have their language to say it."

Similar to the approach of the School Design Team, CBHA didn't solely follow the outline/guidelines provided by Baltimore City Schools; they adapted the process in a way that worked best. They joined the School Design Team meetings in order to gather more information, visited local, recently reconstructed schools to gather highlights and lessons learned from their completed projects and attended field trips with the design team to view examples of excellent school design. With the additional trips, meetings and visits and their focus on collaboration and community input, CBH developed a sense of trust with the team. "Most people would think the real fun happens when the scheme is decided and all of that and then it gets down to like what they would call the design development." Ms. McDowell added that while the team, school and community cared about the design plans, they fully trusted the work of the architects and knew that they would incorporate the values that were shared.

Another key partner in this work was Baltimore City Department of Planning, which managed the INSPIRE program (*Investing in Neighborhoods and Schools to Promote Improvement, Revitalization, and Excellence*). The program worked to leverage community investment and enhance the connection between the 21st Century schools and the surrounding neighborhoods. The INSPIRE investments directly linked the school-community connection established in Reservoir Hill. **"Students only spend a certain portion of their time in class; the rest of their time they are influenced by the streets**

and their houses," said Mr. Gwynallen. **"These INSPIRE investments are as critical to student success as anything. So I see them side by side, hand in hand."**

Early in the process, Healthy Neighborhoods, Inc. was committed to investments to improve Reservoir Hill. Healthy Neighborhoods convened communities to determine how to maximize community improvements and investments in neighborhoods. The City's adoption of the INSPIRE program supported and expanded efforts occurring in Reservoir Hill.

Finally, Baltimore City Schools, through Nicole Price, provided expertise and support for John Eager Howard throughout the process. For Ms. Hanson, "Every time we came to her with an issue, she was open and ready to listen... She never said, 'Well that's not my job!'"

Engagement

The John Eager Howard Design Team sought breadth and depth of input from the community and utilized a wide variety of strategies to reach as many people in the community as possible.

"Well, you don't just snap your fingers and get community engagement. And the way some people think about community engagement is, "Okay, let's have a big event, have some food and have some people come out..." You might have a few people [for whom] this whets their appetite for engagement or a few people who already, because of some position they hold in the community, want to be a part of it. This is very different than the type of engagement I think that we built at John Eager Howard."

Carol Reckling, *Former Executive Director, Child First Authority*

The John Eager Howard Design Core team assumed that all parents and community members have a lot of intelligence and value to add to the design process. As they set to engage members of the community, the team identified that they were planning for the current community of residents: those who lived in the neighborhood and those who would utilize the school. They wanted to attract new residents and families, but knew that planning for hypothetical people would not be authentic to the process. In order for community members to be engaged in the

process, they didn't need to be part of a committee, they just needed to be themselves. Mr. Gwynallen observed:

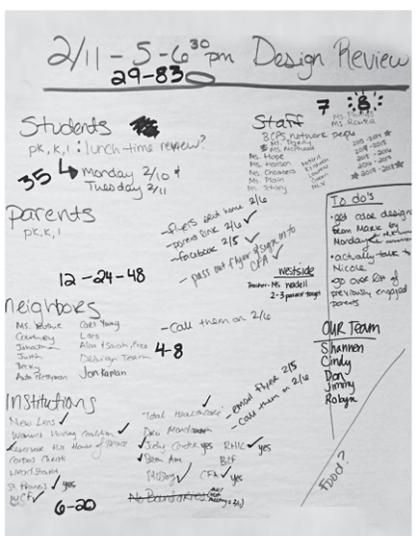
"A lot of times you put together little committees and these committees are based upon people who have particular skills. One of the most disheartening things for most people is that they don't believe that they can, that they know enough.... The people in our communities are very valuable. They have intelligence, they have creativity and they have valuable opinions. And that was the core of what this was all about. We used professionals like Cho Benn Holback and Boecker, but their purpose was to help actualize all of that."

Before engaging the community in the design process, the Design Team discussed what they called the "pre-conditions to engagement." First, they were clear that "the most important thing [about the design process] was [to figure out], 'How are we going to best serve our students, families and the larger community?'" said Paula Jones, JEH Social Worker. With that idea guiding the team, the team completed an asset and power map of the neighborhood. They identified persons and organizations within the school and community who had a lot of power, a following and a strong voice. The Design Team not only identified the key individuals on their list of persons to engage, they reached out to these persons first. These identified persons typically had relationships and access to a broad number of people and could help introduce the team to others in order to get additional feedback. The assets identified by the team included strong partners and relationships that existed within the school, the community and RHIC. Having these "preconditions" helped the group begin their methods of engagement and involvement. **"There's input and then there's involvement,"** highlighted Ms. McDowell, **"We wanted true engagement, not just input."**

In order to engage the community in the process, the Design Team at John Eager Howard often spoke of "breadth and depth." Breadth of engagement can seem easier than depth. Breadth only requires a person to connect one time with a member of the community and think, "That's it!" Depth engagement establishes a relationship and reengagement multiple times. Depth of their engagement process occurred in small group or one-on-one meetings. Meetings of depth often included the persons and organizations identified in their asset and power maps. They were able to meet people where they were, physically. According to parent Robyn Williams, "We listened in the neighborhoods, we listened in the schools, we got kids involved, we spoke with people every opportunity we could!"

That meant members of the team met with parents at previously scheduled school sponsored events like back to school night, Friday Coffee Chats (where parents regularly attended Friday morning coffee and continental breakfast to chat with one another and about the school) and during the Child First after-school program dismissal. Students participated in design forums and visioning meetings in their classrooms, during the after-school program and during back to school night. **"Parents appreciated the fact that they were involved. That made them feel like this wasn't [something that was going] to happen whether you like it or not,"** said JEH Social Worker Paula Jones. Staff members met during regularly scheduled staff and grade level team meetings. In the community, Design Team Members met with community members at the Whitelock Community Farm in Reservoir Hill, on people's doorsteps and at places of worship, like Beth Am Synagogue. The depth of engagement did not require a new event. "There's already all of these things that we and the community were utilizing to engage," Ms. Bowman explained. "When that was insufficient, then we went door-knocking."

The breadth strategy of the Design Team's engagement allowed the team to reach larger numbers of school and community members, often times for a shorter length of time compared to a small group meeting. According to Ms. McDowell, breadth also ensured that the team's engagement reflected the demographics of the community, something that the team insisted was necessary. The team knocked on over 450 doors in the area to speak to residents. "It didn't matter whether somebody, a neighbor, had a child that attended John Eager Howard, [the Design Team] wanted to know what [that neighbor] thought the school could do for them regardless: how it could benefit and what they could get out of it," said Cho Benn Holback architect Mark Nook. The Design



Team also used surveys as a way to test assumptions that emerged from the small group sessions they held. Interestingly, the breadth strategies created additional energy for the Design Team. **“Getting out into the community created movement for the team,”** explained Ms. McDowell. As energy seemed to wane on the team, members scheduled door-knocking campaigns that got them out of buildings and deeper into the neighborhood, talking to residents. The enthusiasm that residents shared energized members of the team and encouraged the team to continue the process.

The Design Team and leaders genuinely believed that the community knows best. The team also prioritized knowing the community and understanding their dreams and needs. As a result of reaching a large number of residents, the team did not make decisions on behalf of the community, instead they helped make decisions that were directly informed from the breadth and depth of the engagement from the community. “We made sure we were non-threatening when engaging the community. We told people, ‘You don’t need to be experts in anything – just in yourself and your needs!’” explained Ms. McDowell. When asked what advice he’d give to other communities going through this process, Mr. Akchin said, “The team and leaders need to believe that the community knows best. They need to be open to input and feedback. There was a genuine belief amongst [our] team that ‘communities understand what’s best for me.’ If you sincerely believe this, you have to have a process to listen effectively, with organized feedback.”

The ultimate success of the engagement translated into a community-owned school design, based on values and needs of the parents, students, staff and broader community. In addition to a comprehensive school design, the team created “people power.” During the selection of designs, a debate occurred during a public meeting between advocates of Scheme B, a complete reconstruction, and Scheme C, a partial renovation that would allow the school to keep its auditorium. While most in attendance wanted Scheme C, a few vocal community members and developers wanted Scheme B. The debate continued through the process, and ultimately the school board was charged with deciding which design would move forward for recommendation. Ultimately, because the Design Team had a record of organizing community input, it was able to make the case that keeping the school auditorium aligned with the values and needs of most families in the school and residents in the community. The school board selected Scheme C. **“We had people power! After telling us we had a model process, no one was eager to slam the door in our face and go against what we proposed,”** Mr. Akchin said.



JEH and Reservoir Hill students and community members gather to decide the best design for the new school.

Challenges



“This was a big learning curve for all of us!”

Individuals interviewed openly shared struggles and challenges with the design process. Most of the challenges centered on the idea that the process was a new venture, for everyone involved. The two challenges that emerged were the school system's lack of capacity and the difficulty of sustaining involvement.

Capacity

A challenge resulted from embarking on 21st Century Buildings program, the largest construction project for Baltimore City Schools that began with a limited number of City Schools staff working on the process. The scope of schools' design and construction and the emphasis on community engagement made this project unlike any other school building project in the country.

For the first time, Baltimore City Schools sought to manage the construction of approximately 25 school buildings in a tight timeframe. In fact, no models throughout the country led a buildings project of the same magnitude, in the same way as Baltimore City. Nicole Price, formerly Director of Family and Community Engagement with Baltimore City Schools, recalled, “Although we called other districts and visited places like Cincinnati, no one was doing this project the way City Schools was attempting to do it. And so there wasn’t a blueprint or something we could take and say, ‘Okay, here is what worked there, here are

the challenges they faced, let’s tweak this, let’s tweak that.’ And so we were really learning as we went along.” ACLU’s Bebe Verdery explained, “This was a big learning curve for all of us!”

The City Schools’ 21st Century Buildings team consisted of five people, four of whom had other full-time responsibilities. Interviewees recognized that many of the capacity concerns reflected the inadequate number of BCPS staff persons working on the 21st Century Buildings planning process.

Multiple people interviewed felt an easier option would have been for the school district to allow architects to come up with designs and then build schools that architects create, without community input. That strategy would not have served the community well and interviewees were glad BCPS chose a different approach. However, that choice came with obstacles. With limited capacity at City Schools and a monumental project to manage,

communication and implementation suffered – particularly as it affected community input. Members of the Design Team mentioned that often little notice was given to the school and community regarding dates and times of meetings from City Schools. Architect Joe Cellucci expressed, “The design schedule was very, very quick for us...By the time our designs got approved by City Schools and were put out there and a meeting was set up in the community, often there wasn’t enough time to give adequate notice to the community...There were still 50 to 60 people there, but with more than two days’ notice, maybe they could have gotten 200 people there.” In addition, meeting dates changed. **“You can’t do that to parents and community folks but so many times,”** said Ms. Reckling. Ms. Price, who worked on the building’s engagement process, reflected, “Some of [the meeting notification has] to do with a particular timeline...That goes back to this being the first time embarking on a project like this and learning as we went along.”

Sustaining Involvement

The John Eager Howard Design Team found that sustaining their engagement for over 1.5 years proved to be a challenge.

The John Eager Howard design team worked together for more than 18 months while gathering community input. Sustaining the engagement of the team, let alone the broader community, was not an easy task. The team typically met every other week over that period, but there were times when there wasn’t a need to meet, no upcoming decisions to be made or when the team waited for the next phase of design work and community engagement to begin. “Somehow we came back together,” said Mr. Akchin. The team continued to return to the work because “the school is so critical to the neighborhood, it is important that we get it right!” The concern of sustainability for the team’s and the community’s engagement doesn’t end with the design process.

Looking to the future, some have expressed that the momentum gained from the design process has been lost. “If you have people who were really committed to this process, they could be real advocates,” said design team member Courtney Bettle, “I would really hate for there to be something that comes up where you need a set of advocates...and we’ve lost the momentum and can’t rally the troops. There are probably ways we could be supporting the school now, but I don’t know what that is.”

Reservoir Hill Improvement Council

Reservoir Hill was a premiere urban community in the late 19th century. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, the community was impacted by the typical ills of inner-city, urban areas. Over the last few decades, many nonprofits and Baltimore City have invested in the stabilization of the neighborhood. In 2000, Reservoir Hill became one of the original Healthy Neighborhoods, receiving more than \$23 million to help stabilize the community.

The community maintained its diverse population, both racially and socioeconomically, during the course of stabilization. The Mayor established an Advisory Station for Reservoir Hill, with residents from the community serving as board members. The community also had 22 active block clubs, but over time the need for a holistic community organization emerged. In the early 1990s the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council (RHIC) was created as an umbrella organization to bring block clubs together to work towards improving the whole neighborhood. Another purpose of RHIC was to ensure that the stabilization and development work within Reservoir Hill benefited everyone in the neighborhood.

By the late 1990s RHIC had evolved from an all-volunteer organization to one with a small paid staff. At the same time, neighborhood based organizations such as New Lens, Whitelock Community Farm, St. Francis Neighborhood Center, and places of worship like Beth Am Synagogue emerged. RHIC worked in partnership with residents as well as the neighborhood organizations to advocate for the Reservoir Hill community..

RHIC strives to unite, empower, and mobilize residents and organizations to define and take action on issues common to the Reservoir Hill Community. The four major areas of focus for the organization are schools and recreation, greening, housing and development, and special initiatives like the Baltimore Community Foundation’s Target Neighborhood Initiative. For more than 20 years, RHIC has built an infrastructure that connects Reservoir Hill with political leaders, other organizations, foundations and school and district leaders while developing the leadership capacity of residents through organizing.

Reservoir Hill was selected as one of the original Healthy Neighborhoods in 2000. Its desirable but undervalued Victorian homes and its long history of activism by residents made it a good fit for Healthy Neighborhoods resources. At that time, the neighborhood suffered from many foreclosures and vacant homes. HNI has supported dozens of resident-led projects to plant trees, add lighting and flower boxes to homes, build playgrounds and community signage, restore fountains, create a community gathering space and support the expansion of the Whitelock Community Farm. As a result of \$23 million of investment from HNI, more than fifty families have purchased and renovated homes throughout the community, and eight formerly vacant houses on Callow Avenue have been redeveloped for homeownership.

Good schools stabilize and improve neighborhoods. The rebuilding of John Eager Howard Elementary School is a critical investment upon which the neighborhood’s future success depends. The neighborhood’s involvement in the rebuilding of the school provides rich lessons for communities, school families, educators, advocates, school systems and public officials.

Westside Elementary School



“I wish that we would push the city government’s leaders to have better neighborhoods or supports for those communities [with a high concentration of poverty]”.

Westside/Penn North Context

Most of this narrative focused on the work at John Eager Howard Elementary School, within the Reservoir Hill community. A complicated, yet integral part of the design process involved merging John Eager Howard and Westside Elementary School. In 2012, Baltimore City Schools issued the Jacob’s Study report that called for closing Westside. After the release of the study, communities of both Reservoir Hill (John Eager Howard) and Penn North (Westside Elementary School), remained unclear about the actual timeline for closure and whether Westside Elementary School would actually close. This uncertainty persisted throughout the design planning for the new John Eager Howard/Westside Elementary combination.

Some interviewed spoke openly about the difference in the Penn North and Reservoir Hill neighborhoods. Delegate Antonio Hayes serves as the Maryland State Delegate for District 40, which encompasses Penn North and Reservoir Hill. He grew up in the Penn North neighborhood, attended Westside Elementary School, moved to Reservoir Hill after college and joined the RHIC board. According to Delegate Hayes, just by crossing McCullough Street, you could see a huge disparity between the two neighborhoods. Geography remains one contributor to the difference between the two neighborhoods. He described Druid Park Avenue and McCullough Streets as “mini expressways” that divide the two

communities. Also, in the past 10 to 15 years, he feels that **“there are so many resources focused on Reservoir Hill as far as improvement in housing and the quality of life. Whereas in Penn North we haven’t seen any investment in the last 20 years.”** He and Principal Brian Plum of Westside Elementary spoke about Penn North residents feeling like “the forgotten ones.” “I wish that we would push the city government’s leaders to have better neighborhoods or supports for those communities [with a high concentration of poverty]. It seems to me, from the outside looking in, that we’re picking and choosing certain neighborhoods to invest in,” explained Mr. Plum.

In April 2015, less than a year before the school board’s vote to close Westside, the death of Freddie Gray sparked civil unrest. Freddie Gray’s arrest occurred just south of the Penn North community, but the epicenter of the uprising occurred in the Penn North community. In comparing Penn North to Reservoir Hill, Mr. Plum suggested “that renovation, that spirit [of], investment from the city hasn’t come to Penn North yet, or hasn’t come. The Freddie Gray incident highlighted Penn North more than anything else.” Delegate Hayes attempted to bring attention to the fact that “this is where [the uprising] happened! Everyone is saying what they want to do for these young people as a result of this uprising. Well, this is where it happened!” The closing of Westside only added to the community’s feeling of being overlooked or disregarded.

The Closing of a School

Westside Elementary School went through a closure process that devastated the school and Penn North community.

Child First assigned a community organizer to work with Westside Elementary School in 2010 to build a school team to organize for an after-school program and after-school funding. In 2011, Westside began operating a Child First after-school program. Building on the momentum of organizing for after-school funding, in the spring of 2012, Westside Elementary School organized with the Baltimore Education Coalition/Transform Baltimore to advocate for the school construction campaign. While the engaged Westside school team was smaller than John Eager Howard's team, a core group of parents and staff members at Westside organized people to attend actions at City Hall, share testimony with legislators and ensure a win for school construction. "When I got [to Westside in 2012], folks were excited and ready to move," described Larry Simmons, former Community School Coordinator at Westside Elementary School.

Throughout the campaign to receive funding for Baltimore City school renovations, organizers knew schools would need to close. A stipulation put in place by the Maryland General Assembly required Baltimore City Schools to have a higher utilization of buildings. As of 2012, the district only used 65% of its available space. Baltimore City Schools' building portfolio had the capacity to accommodate 121,302 students, while only 78,511 students used the buildings. The Westside community felt closure was a possibility as their student enrollment steadily declined.

Some of the Westside school community sensed their school could possibly close, although they did not have certainty. Mr. Pluim worried that declining enrollment would impact the school system's decision to keep the school open. "Before Westside even closed, we were feeling like because of shrinking population, that potentially it could close." In June 2012, the Jacobs Report, *State of School Facilities*, was released. The Jacobs Report, commissioned by Baltimore City Public Schools, assessed the overall facility conditions and educational adequacy of all Baltimore City Public School buildings. The report recommended that Westside close, along with other schools throughout the district. Principal Pluim recalled, "And I believe that we told the community at that time, that the school would eventually close. There wasn't much said at the time because it was years away. It wasn't going to happen that year or at the end of the school year. It was going to happen

in a couple of years, so folks were kind of like, 'Oh okay, I've got a couple of years and then it will close.'" Delegate Hayes felt most residents were unaware of the release of the report and the recommendation to close Westside Elementary School. According to Larry Simmons, after the official release of the Jacobs Report, the organized team at Westside slowly began to lose its enthusiasm but remained hopeful that the school wasn't going to close until they received confirmation from City Schools.

"By the time [BCPS] started having meetings with Westside families [about the closure], they were having meetings at John Eager Howard about transportation to Westside [for students during the construction phase]," stated Mr. Simmons. RHIC and the John Eager Howard Design Team worked to try to include Westside in the design process. **"We had a design that was fairly cemented in before they said, 'Ok, let's start talking to Westside,'"** stated architect Mark Nook. Once the architects presented designs to Westside, they felt the designs were well received. However, Ms. Price explains that the design meeting at Westside, had nothing to do with design and more to do with the impact of the school closing. Most of the meeting was spent talking about the walking route to the new school, traffic and crime stats, what's happening with Westside's teachers and why can't City Schools construct two schools, instead of just one. "Coming to a school that is slated to close and say, 'Hey, I want you to talk about this design of a new building,' before you address their concerns about the culture of their school, before you allow them to go through loss and grief, you get very little if any participation," said Ms. Price.

By spring 2015, John Eager Howard neared the end of design planning, and Baltimore City Department of Planning's INSPIRE process began in the Reservoir Hill Community. Originally, the INSPIRE process did not include improvements to the Penn North community. Rick Gwynallen, from RHIC, convinced city planning to expand to include Penn-North. He called a meeting with Principal Pluim, Delegate Antonio Hayes and Heather Martin from Department of Planning to discuss plans; this was the first time that all parties came together. "It was evident that [Westside and the Penn North communities] weren't ready for the school to close. Westside believed, from conversations with City Schools, if they increased enrollment, the school could stay open... [Westside] was willing to hold off with planning with INSPIRE in order to work on organizing for their school to remain open." Through the INSPIRE process, some investment was made

directly surrounding Westside Elementary. While the INSPIRE improvements for Westside occurred, the optics of the investment felt insincere to some members at Westside Elementary. Mr. Pluim recalled that the improvements didn't occur until John Eager Howard students joined the Westside campus. Suddenly, **“there were a number of repairs they did to the [school] building, to the outside, to the sidewalk, to the street. But all the time we've been there, those repairs were never done. So people are left feeling like, 'Why aren't we valued the way others are valued?'”**

The closure of Westside felt imminent for the larger school community at the start of the 2015-2016 school year. Mr. Pluim explains, “I don't think [City Schools] got really honest until the end.” Westside parents, staff, alumni, community members and legislators began organizing with the Westside community to keep the school open. “We had a group of parents go to North Avenue to give testimony,” said Larry Simmons. “I felt bad because a lot of them felt like it was pointless. It really was, but Delegate Hayes got a whole bus and got dinner and it was about 20-30 Westside parents that went. And they cried and did all types of stuff.” Delegate Hayes felt that the school community already felt defeated and felt that the decision was already made. “It wasn't until they saw the school board overturn the decision for Renaissance High School that they felt like, ‘Okay, maybe we might have a chance!’” Mr. Pluim felt that decisions like the one to overturn Renaissance High School's closure created more confusion. “I'm not sure we know what is going to change the district's mind [about closing schools]. In other words, you say we're going to be heard...but we don't know why there was a change in [not] closing [a particular] school. What did they do to change everyone's mind? It's just confusion with that.”

On January 2, 2016, three and a half years after the release of the Jacobs Report, the Baltimore City School Board voted to close Westside.

Reflections and Looking Ahead

Many involved in the Westside School closure process shared thoughts and ideas to help future schools and communities that face a school closure.

Interviewees shared numerous reflections about ways the closing of Westside (and other schools) can improve. The intentions of Baltimore City and Baltimore City Schools remain to improve the quality of facilities across the city and positively impact as many children and communities as possible, with the funding on hand. Carol Reckling, from Child First, reiterated that the state wanted and needed to close some Baltimore schools for a while. “It was part of the bargain” and needed to happen, she said. While true, the execution of initial closings of schools and the lessons learned from those experiences are noted. Ms. Price from City Schools said, **“We built out a pretty robust set of meetings and process steps but there was nothing to deal with how you actually bring two school communities together.”** She also reiterated that Baltimore is a city of neighborhoods. Ms. Price added that often, people know what happens in their own community, the good and the bad, but they don't know what happens in another community. The process should address these anxieties.

Some viewed the lack of transparency from City Schools as an additional factor of anxiety for the Westside closure process. From the release of the Jacobs report in 2012 until the school board's decision in January 2016, the Westside/Penn North community held onto the possibility to remain open. Mr. Pluim said that the need for the school system to get “community input” extended the final and inevitable outcome to close the school, a decision that was already determined but prolonged in his opinion. “Be honest with people. I don't think we got honest until the end. It was like [the school system finally said], ‘No you're really closing and there's nothing you can do.’ But [since] it took so long for folks to say that, [they gave] people hope.” If a definitive decision occurred sooner, the principals of both schools felt that the Westside/Penn North communities could have had more time to heal and process the change. “Give folks the chance to buy into it, instead of fight it,” said Mr. Pluim. Providing more time for a closing school's community to process the change might create a smoother transition to merge with another school. In the 2016-2017 school year, the two schools merged. Ms. Hanson believes that giving a community less than 9 months to fully grieve the loss of their school and plan for the

transition to merge with another isn't enough time. "[Parents] are still not accepting [the closure of Westside]. They weren't accepting it then and some of them still aren't now!"

Interviewees shared a common belief that a closing school community should receive a sense of hope; those communities should be part of the design process for the new school building; immediately following a closing, children should attend a brand new building and plans for the vacant building should be discussed and designed with the community. "Having [Westside] involved in this [design] process might have given them more hope," commented Joe Cellucci from Cho Benn Holback and Associates, "If they had been brought in earlier, into this new school regardless of its name and been involved in its design, they would have been looking forward and more hopeful." Westside Elementary School and John Eager Howard Elementary School merged into the Westside campus during construction of the new school at the former John Eager Howard site. "The Westside students lost everything... They lost their school, principal, teachers and school name. No school should close until a new building is constructed so they can [immediately] attend something better," stated Ms. McDowell.

As communities process their school's closure, planning for the vacant building should occur with community input. Mr. Simmons noted that the school meant a great deal to the Penn North community. In agreement, Principal Pluim noted, "that school was the hub of the area. People came for food. We had a food bank. People came there to do their resumes. So, I just want to know what is going to replace that school." Delegate Antonio Hayes imagines most of the community's anxiety could have been relieved if the school system and the city determined the "potential use [of the Westside building] that was viable for the community, whether it was an after-school program, whatever! That would have given people at least some hope that they hadn't had in the last 20 years or so!" He noted that 20 to 30 vacant properties surround Westside Elementary School. With the addition of a vacant school building, approximately three acres of abandoned properties will cover that area. Once a school building becomes vacant, the school district turns it over to Baltimore City. Mr. Gwynallen noted that Baltimore City's INSPIRE process only includes the planning around communities receiving a new/renovated school- not around the closing school. He stated, "The key thing that has to occur... is that these surplus [vacant] schools need to be filled." Delegate Hayes

said that a group of community members proactively convened so that "instead of [the City] coming to us with a plan, [we can] figure out something on our own."

Moving forward, it seems hopeful that Baltimore City Schools is looking at school mergers differently and embarking on a new strategy. Ms. Price reflected:

"[Closing a school] starts before the team comes together, it starts before we start talking about the design of the new school. It starts with going to that school community and allowing an opportunity to have their voices heard; hearing about how wonderful or how they like their school; hear about their community. [We need] to give them a chance and opportunity to express themselves and for City Schools to take that information in and figure out...how to make sure that the process demonstrates values for people who feel like they are losing more than they are gaining or feel like some other school community was selected over them and therefore it's viewed as that community is better than theirs. [We need to] deal with those things before we even discuss the design of a new school building."

The community members and Westside staff members were satisfied that students who attended Westside will be able to attend a 21st Century School. During the summer of 2016, Westside and John Eager Howard, with the assistance of the Abell Foundation, established a two week student leadership retreat to bring together students from both schools. Delegate Hayes is excited that Penn North students will attend a school with the latest technology and enter a building that feels like it supports students. He enthusiastically said, **"Having the opportunity for these young people to go to a 21st Century School, is awesome!"** Mr. Pluim considers the role of a Baltimore City principal, whether their school closes or not, is to support the ultimate outcome for students across the city, not just in a particular neighborhood, while still caring for the community he/she serves. **"I want [the merger] to work but I also want the Penn North community... to be uplifted."**

Conclusion/ Replication



No community is exactly like the Reservoir Hill or Penn North neighborhoods. Demographics, community partners, school leadership and community infrastructure vary. While communities differ, if a school and/or community wishes to exactly replicate the experience at John Eager Howard Elementary School in Reservoir Hill one would at minimum have to have:

- **A staffed community-based organization of long standing, with a commitment to the importance of schools to neighborhood development, and staff assigned to school organizing, similar to RHIC.** The long-standing history of RHIC in the Reservoir Hill community and its relationship and investment in John Eager Howard is important and a key function to the outcome of the John Eager Howard Design process. RHIC helped to connect the infrastructures within the community to the school by providing robust community partners and partner relationships, community involvement, initiatives within the school, a school-based organizer to help connect community and school and relationships with organizations and officials throughout Baltimore City.
- **A principal who sees the community-school connection as important and is willing to support the work.** A school leader must embrace school and community input and work along with team members to advance the design process. If a school leader cannot be present, a trusted proxy should serve in his/her place.
- **A mix of long-term and newer residents, community partners and parents willing to work together and supported by staff from the community-based organization and the Community School Coordinator.** The diversity of the team provides not only varied perspectives and interests, it also provides access to diverse networks and groups of people within the community.
- **A Child First Community School Coordinator and the support of Child First's organizing and programming resources, or a comparable community school resource.** Child First provided trained organizers to work directly with the school and community. By supporting a community school coordinator and operating an after school program, Child First was able to build relationships with and between the school staff and parents of the school. The Community School Coordinator also helped lead the design process.

We recommend:

- Every school be a Community School staffed by a Community School Coordinator.
- BCPS encourage principals to interact with the surrounding community and provide time in their schedules to do so.
- BCPS offer a timeline for school design planning that allows for more time to prepare for public sessions.
- BCPS directly inform school communities when a school is planned for closure, describe the processes by which students will be transferred, and describe how the future use of the closing school will be determined. This should be done in advance of planning the design and merger of a new school.
- INSPIRE be funded to invest in the neighborhoods surrounding closing schools as well as around schools targeted for redevelopment.
- Community participation be required in determining the future use of closing schools, and that a system be put in place as part of the closing to develop a community-based plan for the closing school's redevelopment.
- Public and private funding entities invest in long-term community-based infrastructure and ensure that community organizers are on the ground at least part-time in every neighborhood or group of neighborhoods working together.
- Public and private funding entities support the ability of collaborative entities to conduct outreach to neighborhoods and organizer training.
- Close relationships be fostered between community-based organizations and schools serving their neighborhoods long before school design starts.
- School communities own a values-driven design process, while working in collaboration with BCPS. These communities should not rely solely on the timeline established by BCPS but instead meet in advance of the planning process and multiple times in between BCPS-scheduled meetings.

A Tale of Two Schools

	John Eager Howard	Westside
2014 enrollment	209	302
Eligible for reduced price meals	98.6%	92.1%
Attendance	92.8%	89.5%
Chronic absent	15.5%	30.1%
Math proficient	69%	25%
Reading proficient	73%	58%

Comparing Two Neighborhoods

	Reservoir Hill	Penn North
2017 population (est.)	5990	1860
% African American	85%	96%
% White	11%	1%
No high school diploma, age 25+	17%	25%
Households	2898	673
Average household income	\$ 48,692	\$ 37,263
Households w/o vehicles	41%	52%
Families w/ children below poverty	21%	18%
Median owner-occupied housing value	\$ 209,447	\$ 100,969



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