

Amelia Street School
Urban Design Committee
April 10, 2025

Project Purpose:

Amelia Street School is a Richmond Public School located in Richmond's historically redlined, underserved Randolph neighborhood that serves students ages 5 to 21 years with significant intellectual disabilities, behavioral issues, or complex health needs (which include physical disabilities).

Principal Mark Phillips has a goal of creating partnerships within the community that can bring expertise and resources to his school. Specifically, he is seeking partnerships that support hands-on activities, build functional life skills, highlight the outdoors, and create safe learning environments for his students.

The goals of this project are to improve water quality in the James River by reducing nutrient and sediment pollution and to promote outdoor learning and environmental literacy through enhanced access to the schoolyard for all students, regardless of ability level. Proposed best management practices include bioretention areas, conservation landscaping, increased native tree canopy, and a permeable, ADA-accessible trail. At Amelia Street School, the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay (the Alliance) is focused on utilizing green stormwater infrastructure as a child-friendly, playful demonstration of how water flows.

The path forward at the Amelia Street School will demonstrate that the confluence of accessibility, ecology, safety and education can also be beautiful and engaging.

Background:

In 2020, Virginia Commonwealth University Office of Sustainability (VCU) converted 8,500 square feet of previously mowed turf lawn to "tree islands." These tree islands are native, conservation landscapes containing a combination of trees, shrubs, grasses, and perennials. In 2021, VCU reached out to the Alliance for their expertise in environmental education because Principal Phillips was seeking ways to connect his students to this new outdoor asset. The location of these five "tree islands" is problematic, however, because they sit downhill from the school building, over 100 feet away with no accessible pathway. A brainstorming session with the Alliance, Principal Phillips, and VCU led to the idea of an accessible nature trail that could link all these spaces.

Since the initial idea was proposed, the Alliance received both funding for a conceptual trail design and engineered design from the Chesapeake Bay Trust, as well as implementation funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Partners have met monthly with Principal Phillips to brainstorm ideas and plan community engagement activities to inform the final engineered design. Additionally, Bobby Hathaway, Director of Facilities for RPS, is invited to all partner meetings and attends when possible or is responsive to questions via email.

Once completed, this project will become part of Alliance's larger showcase of projects with Richmond Public Schools, and will be the first of its kind to use innovative green infrastructure to highlight the importance of inclusivity in the outdoors. It can be used as a model of what is possible as older school buildings are renovated and new schools are constructed. Together, these efforts will ultimately better prepare the school and Randolph communities for the impacts of climate change.

Project Context:

Amelia Street is situated on 10 acres of a large city block just north of the James River in the Randolph neighborhood. Existing site conditions include a one story school building, two playgrounds with rubber mulch, and an asphalt basketball court. Since its construction in the 1950's, Amelia Street has received building upgrades to become ADA-accessible. The schoolyard, however, features a steep grade, which is problematic for students with mobility issues. Oftentimes, these students have few opportunities to access green space, so this project intentionally centers inclusivity in the outdoors for children of all abilities. According to conversations with school staff, the expansive, open turf also presents an issue to students with behavioral concerns for "eloping." These students tend to use this strategy to "run away" and have no explicit boundaries with the exception of the fence around the perimeter of the schoolyard. This project will apply innovative solutions to mitigate this concern by planting native shrubs to create a hedge and visual barrier, as well as by creating "nodes" or clearly defined stopping points along the nature trail that can double as learning opportunities. With intentional placement of green stormwater infrastructure and an accessible outdoor trail, the Alliance will create safe, nature-inspired boundaries while also providing equitable access to green space for students of all abilities.

Community Driven Design:

The Alliance, along with Marvel and VCU, has led a robust community engagement effort for this project. Meetings have been held with Amelia Street school staff, including Principal Phillips, teachers, aides, physical therapists, and occupational therapists who work closely with the student population. A public open house was hosted on site and a booth was set up at Byrd House Market to gain feedback from the larger community who uses the space outside of school hours. Feedback methods used for this engagement included an interactive poster board, sticky notes, a paper survey, and postcards with prompts to solicit comments about existing spaces. Additionally, Common Table Church, a house of worship in the Randolph community, and the Richmond Master Gardeners have expressed an interest in volunteering to help maintain the newly planted spaces.

These key stakeholders provided the following feedback, which has been incorporated into the design:

- Providing full access to all areas of the site for students with mobility devices
- Providing adequate sight lines across the schoolyard to monitor the students during play
- Create an array of spaces or 'nodes' for students and community members with sensory disabilities or sensitivities that provide opportunities for quiet, textural experiences, or to improve their gross motor skills

- Companion seating, free of obstructions, next to all of the benches and picnic tables for a wheelchair user to sit comfortably among others
- Outdoor classroom space
- A redesigned basketball court that can accommodate multiple sports
- Shade and seating adjacent to the gathering “nodes”, playground, and the ball court

Project Budget and Funding Sources:

The Alliance has approximately \$375,000 allocated for construction from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, as well as an additional pending \$100,000 proposal for green infrastructure improvements. The Alliance continues to seek funding for the ADA trail.

Construction Timeline:

Improvements made to Amelia Street’s schoolyard include an ADA-accessible trail, a bioswale, a bioretention area, native landscaping and tree plantings. Construction is anticipated to begin in January 2026 with a 6 month construction timeline. The anticipated schedule is below:

Task/Process	Target Completion Date
Community Engagement and Conceptual Design	June 2023 - November 2024
Survey, Environmental, and Utility Location	December 2024
Schematic Design and Design Development	January - June 2025
Construction Documents and Permit Drawings	July 2025
Urban Design Committee Final Review Meeting	August 2025
Permitting	September - December 2025
Bidding and Contractor Award	October - December 2025
Construction	January - May 2026