

**Outdoor Access for All
Amelia Street School
Urban Design Committee
August 14, 2025**

Project Purpose:

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

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.

This project supports the need at Amelia Street School for educational opportunities that support hands-on activities, build functional life skills and highlight the outdoors. 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 the school was seeking ways to connect 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, the school principal, 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, Chesapeake Bay Trust, and Mary Morton Parsons Foundation. Partners have met monthly with school administration 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 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

In May 2025, the project team met with school staff to present the updated design and to collect feedback about specific trail features and amenities. This collaborative effort helped determine from the teacher perspective what playful elements would work best for the needs of the students. For example, the crawling tunnel was replaced with a “cozy house” to allow teachers more visibility of the students during outside time. Teachers and staff reiterated their enthusiasm about interactive elements of the nature trail included in the design and their desire for more shade in the schoolyard.

Project Budget and Funding Sources:

To date, the Alliance has raised \$956,000 for the project. Since the UDC conceptual review, the Alliance has raised an additional \$225,000 in funding towards implementation of green infrastructure practices and the nature trail. Funding sources include the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Chesapeake Bay Trust, and the Mary Morton Parsons Foundation. Additionally, the Alliance applied to the Virginia Environmental Endowment and Universal Leaf Foundation in June 2025 and plans to apply to the Robins Foundation for their Fall grant round. These funds will help cover costs associated with public art, shade structures, and trail construction.

Construction Program:

Activity Description	Associated Deliverables	Responsible Parties	Completion Date (Month and Year)
Urban Design Committee	Finalize conceptual and engineered plans in order to submit and present them at Richmond’s Urban Design Committee for approval and feedback.	The Alliance, Marvel	April 2025 and August 2025
Submit Engineered Design for Permit Approval	Marvel will submit completed engineered design to the City of Richmond for permitting upon receiving feedback from the community and approval by RPS.	Marvel	September 2025 - December 2025
Procurement Process for Construction Contractors	The Alliance will follow their internal procurement process to hire contractors needed to construct the trail and install stormwater practices.	The Alliance	October - November 2025

Construction of the Trail and Stormwater practices	Grading of land, construction of concrete, ADA trail, and installation of bioretention, conservation landscaping.	The Alliance, Marvel, TBD Contractor	January 2026 - May 2026
Maintenance & Additional Planting	The Alliance, along with VCU, Richmond Master Gardeners, a CBLP-certified contractor, and community volunteers, will maintain all installed stormwater practices and coordinate replacement and supplemental plantings.	The Alliance, VCU, Richmond Master Gardeners, TBD Contractor	March 2026 - ongoing

Maintenance:

Maintenance will be managed as a collaboration between the Alliance, Richmond Master Gardeners, VCU, volunteers, and contracted professionals. Currently, the Richmond Master Gardeners have initiated a “Friends of Amelia Street School” community group to help support the maintenance of this project. The Alliance allotted money in the project budget for professional maintenance of the stormwater practices and conservation landscapes for this project through the fall of 2026. Additionally, the Alliance and partners will host volunteer programming at Amelia Street School in which we will conduct maintenance activities such as weeding, watering, and mulching. The Alliance has experience maintaining stormwater projects on Richmond Public School properties such as green infrastructure practices at Dogwood Middle School and the “Reforestation Area” at Lois Harrison-Jones Elementary.

Appendix 1: Staff Feedback Form (conducted at a staff meeting on 5/7/25)

***Please list your 5 favorite optional elements below
and comment on their location along the trail:***

Any additional comments or thoughts?
