

## ABSTRACT

Title of Final Project:

**CONNECTING STUDENTS AND  
COMMUNITIES: A CASE STUDY IN  
HISTORIC SCHOOL REHABILITATION  
VAUX BIG PICTURE HIGH SCHOOL,  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA**

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This project takes a multidisciplinary pronged approach to community development, schools, and historic preservation using a case study of Vaux Big Picture High School, a successfully rehabilitated historic Philadelphia school that was closed and later returned to use as a neighborhood school. Through partner involvement and the incentives of a HUD choice neighborhood grant, the new school has the funds and resources to create essential social, health, and employment support resources for the students and outside community. This case study demonstrates that the school building is an important neighborhood asset and has significance beyond its architectural style or design. In addition, a greater understanding of local history can be appreciated and understood through a broader inquiry into social and cultural community history. The goal of this paper is to encourage preservationists to consider designing spaces with possible community-serving purposes in institutional buildings such as neighborhood schools.

CONNECTING STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES: A CASE STUDY  
IN HISTORIC SCHOOL REHABILITATION  
VAUX BIG PICTURE HIGH SCHOOL,  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

by

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## Preface

The intersection of community needs and historic preservation has weighed heavily on my mind during my graduate studies. While interning for the National Park Service National Underground Network to Freedom Program, I interacted with many community members and professionals who have spent years or their entire careers researching the stories of freedom seekers and their allies. These individuals seek to provide a new perspective and contribute to diversifying our understanding of the Underground Railroad and the history of resistance through escape and flight by nominating a site, facility, or program. Once accepted into the Network, the members are eligible for Network to Freedom grants that can aid in local preservation efforts for sites that are not listed in federal or local historic registries. This intersection between preserving historic community spaces and community members became apparent during one of Dr. Bierbaum's classes that focused on Philadelphia schools. During this class, I discovered that schools across the country have struggled with maintenance issues and lack of funding.

The City of Philadelphia's schools have deteriorated over the years due to a maintenance backlog that has caused items such as asbestos, lead paint, mold, leaky roofs, and others to have a significantly negative impact on students and the school community. The public safety and welfare of the school community and its surrounding neighborhoods are a top priority. For schools that have enough physical and historic integrity, rehabilitation may be the cost-effective answer toward a healthier and enriching learning environment.

## Dedication

This research is dedicated to my sister, husband, and grad school friends. Thank you  
all for your love and support.

## Acknowledgments

I am eternally grateful to the friends I have made during my time at the University of Maryland as well as the opportunity to work for the Network to Freedom. My husband and family have been supportive during this time. I also want to thank Dr. Bierbaum and Dr. Linebaugh for their advice and guidance. I have grown immensely professionally and intellectually and am thankful for all their help.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Historic preservation is an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the historical significance of buildings and cultural landscapes. Community Planning takes Urban Planning theories and concepts and places them into a community context. Historic Preservation and Community Planning have many parallels that revolve around placemaking, community identity, and creating a meaningful space for individuals. While both fields look at tangible heritage and policies that can improve historic or community spaces, preservation is starting to explore significant spaces with human interaction and the environment. Often, these are places where there is very little physical historical evidence remaining. The intangible aspects of community traditions and oral histories can carry on the legacies of the community's identity and history. Historic schools can contain both the physical historic fabric and exchanges of the community's diverse ideas and interactions.

A young community member looks up in awe at the colossal two-story entrance of the historic Vaux Big Picture High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The sizable school building fills much of the block along W. Master Street. The grandeur and architectural decoration and detail of this school is vastly different from the types of modern school construction they have seen. As they watch a student walk through the substantial front doors, the young community member wonders about the school's history and the story of its building.

This 1930's era school is one of many schools that were built at a time when education and public health were prioritized, and architectural design was valued. These schools were designed to encourage learning, while simultaneously tackling

public health concerns regarding hygiene and food availability. All too often, these wider community functions and concerns have been ignored through traditional preservation strategies focused solely on the architectural significance of the structure in isolation.

While this school building and its community have undergone many changes including declining student population and increased violence in the community, the focus on community enrichment and advancement has remained an integral part of its mission. A unique school rehabilitation project, Vaux Big Picture School eschews the almost standard school reuse plan for housing and serves as a model for other historic schools seeking to rethink their places in the community as active educational spaces for a wide audience.

This project explores the intersection of community development, schools, and historic preservation using a case study of a rehabilitated school in Philadelphia. The case study examines Vaux Big Picture High School, a historic Philadelphia school that was successfully rehabilitated and returned to use as a much-needed neighborhood school after a period of disuse. Not only did the project create a neighborhood school, but it embeds important social, health, and employment support resources within the structure. The case study ultimately demonstrates that the school building has significance far beyond its architectural style or design.

The objective of this project is to document how school rehabilitation and reuse projects can take stakeholder input into account to create a healthier and more successful school and stronger neighborhood. In particular, the Vaux school project provides an opportunity to examine how stakeholders' desires are integrated into

rehabilitation projects in ways that result in stronger schools and successful neighborhood support.

Education has always been important to Philadelphia leaders. In 1818, the first school district of Philadelphia was established. The board's first president, Robert Vaux, a Quaker reformer, wanted schools to be tuition free and available to all children. His vision became a reality through the Consolidation Act of 1836.<sup>1</sup> In 1837, the Philadelphia Board of Education opened the publicly supported and funded schools to school age children.

As Philadelphia's school age population expanded during the period from 1900-1940, the number of schools grew to accommodate the growing need for classrooms. A larger budget, increase in construction jobs, and material abundance allowed for many schools to be built. The Work Progress Administration also employed workers to build city schools.<sup>2</sup> For a time, Philadelphia schools accommodated the large student age population. With families leaving the city and moving elsewhere, Philadelphia schools experienced a rapid decrease in enrollment in the 2006- 2011 period. The loss of student population along with a high poverty and violence rate in the area led parents to move their children from the nearby public schools to charter and other private schools. Over 10% of the traditional public-school buildings were closed in 2012-2013 period which left thousands of displaced

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<sup>1</sup> William Cutler, "Public Education: The School District of Philadelphia," Philadelphia Encyclopedia, n.d., <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/public-educationthe-school-district-of-philadelphia/>.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Bauman, "Works Progress Administration Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia "[Works Progress Administration](#)"

students unsure of their educational future. One such school was the Robert Vaux High School.

The Robert Vaux High school, now the Vaux Big Picture School and community center is located at 2300 W. Master Street, Philadelphia, PA. This school sits within the Sharswood neighborhood in North Philadelphia. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Vaux Big Picture School location within Philadelphia city and in the state.

Map by Author.

In 2015, the Philadelphia Housing Authority created a large-scale housing project named the Sharswood neighborhood and the surrounding area was named Sharswood - Blumberg.

The Robert Vaux High School was built between 1936 and 1938 and opened to students in 1939. The school experienced a major renovation in 2006-2007, almost

70 years after its original construction. With enrollment and attendance declining, the school was closed in 2012 to save costs. After sitting vacant for several years, the school was renovated and reopened in 2017 as the Vaux Big Picture School and community center. What follows below is the story of this transformation.

Chapter 2, Historic School Design, Construction, and Reuse, provides a context on school building design and construction and examines the adaptive reuse of school buildings. Chapter 3 highlights the historical context of Philadelphia schools, offers information on the issue of unsafe school conditions and funding concerns and provide details about the deferred maintenance problems of the Philadelphia School System. Chapter 4 explores Vaux School, its history, and examines its neighborhood and stakeholders. Chapter 5 examines plans for neighborhood renewal, the rehabilitation plan for the school and the current operations of the complex. The last chapter concludes with lessons learned and recommendations for creating a successful school design that incorporates stakeholder input, respects, and integrates the structure's history, funding for rehabilitation, and prioritizing public safety in school capital improvements.

### **Problem Statement**

This project explores the intersection of community development, schools, and historic preservation using a case study of a rehabilitated school in Philadelphia. As populations grew in the 1920's and 30's, so did the need for larger community buildings such as schools. Schools evolved from one - room schoolhouses to multistory building. These multistory schools like Vaux met those demands of the

once surging school population but now are experiencing deteriorating conditions and most importantly, a smaller school population and maintenance budget.

### **Research Questions**

The main research questions revolved around how a school rehabilitation project could incorporate common spaces such as auditoriums and be utilized by the community for job training or career development classes. Can a rehabilitation project create a safe and clean environment while considering potential maintenance shortages and deficit funding? What is the process for rehabilitating a school? Is rehabilitating a historic school cheaper than building new? What guidance is provided to help create a successful historic school rehabilitation project? How can historic schools be reused as educational beacons that incorporate community concerns and desires into the design/redesign of the building? What parts of the school are historically significant to the community and how can those memories/traditions be respected and honored?

### **Methodology**

This project uses the case study approach, focusing on one rehabilitated and re-envisioned school in Philadelphia. The main research goal was to understand the history of the school, the factors that led to its closure, and the community's reactions to Vaux's closure and the creation of the new school. To do this, multidisciplinary skills were used to examine planning documents as well as historic primary and secondary sources. The National Register nomination as well as Philadelphia historic school nominations helped provide the basic architectural understanding of the school. The Sharswood- Blumberg Neighborhood plan provided the future

neighborhood plans and explained why Vaux was crucial to the neighborhood's revitalization. Historic architectural journals such as the *Pencil Point* and the *Architectural Forum* provided historical ads on materials being used for school construction as well as essays on school building design and thinking. There was an essay written about school building design by Vaux's architect.

Newspaper articles from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, interviews from PBS's WHYY, academic journal articles, and an article from the Smithsonian magazine were used to gain further context on Vaux and the neighborhood's recent activity and opinions of the school's reopening. Philadelphia's "Architects and Building" website provided historic maps and photos of the site. Photographs through the Philadelphia School Collective, Flickr, and *Inquirer* articles provide visuals on the interior of the school.

## Chapter 2: Historic School Design, Construction and Reuse

### **Introduction**

Over the decades, school buildings have been adapted to fit the needs of the communities they serve through building design, materials, and allocation of space. Books and articles on pedagogy and school design began the conversation of how modern schools would look and function. For example, in 1905, architects realized that school building design needed to change to reflect improved knowledge of fire safety. As school buildings expanded in size, the adequate space allocation for each student was being debated.

### **Changes in School Design**

#### **Design**

Architects across the country began rethinking how school buildings were constructed and clad beginning in the early 1900s. Prior to this, schools were often one-story buildings with small classrooms or in families' homes. As school age populations grew, schoolhouses became larger to accommodate the larger class size and began having multiple rooms to separate age groups.

The urbanization of cities across the country from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent increase in school aged children meant that many school buildings were being constructed during this period to accommodate increasing enrollments. A 1970's article in the *American Journal of Sociology* by John W. Myer et. al researched factors that led to the high enrollment of school age children across rural and urban areas during the 1930's. They concluded that urbanization, Republican Party dominance, and Evangelical Protestantism, all fostered the idea that

improved school buildings and education contributed to the idea of nation building.<sup>3</sup>

Figure (2) illustrates that 1930 had the highest mean enrollment of that time in public schools across the nation.

TABLE 2  
MEAN PUBLIC PRIMARY ENROLLMENTS AS A PROPORTION OF AGE-GROUP POPULATION: AMERICAN STATES,  
1870-1930, BY REGION AND DEGREE OF URBANIZATION

	Year						
	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930
All states.....	.58	.65	.69	.74	.76	.80	.83
SD.....	.23 (35)	.16 (37)	.11 (42)	.09 (45)	.08 (46)	.09 (48)	.08 (48)
Total northern and western states:	.76 (19)	.75 (21)	.73 (25)	.78 (28)	.79 (28)	.82 (30)	.84 (30)
Urban.....	.70 ( 6)	.70 ( 6)	.69 ( 6)	.72 ( 6)	.70 ( 6)	.76 ( 6)	.79 ( 6)
Middle.....	.79 ( 8)	.77 ( 8)	.75 ( 8)	.79 ( 9)	.78 ( 9)	.77 ( 9)	.81 ( 9)
Rural.....	.56 ( 4)	.75 ( 5)	.80 ( 5)	.86 ( 5)	.85 ( 5)	.85 ( 6)	.89 ( 6)
Border states.....	.47 ( 5)	.64 ( 5)	.69 ( 6)	.75 ( 6)	.76 ( 6)	.77 ( 6)	.76 ( 6)
Southern states.....	.29 (10)	.45 ( 8)	.57 (10)	.63 (10)	.68 (10)	.75 (10)	.83 (10)

SOURCE.—U.S. Office of Education 1870-1930.  
NOTE.—Cell entries are means; cases are in parentheses; for regional and urbanization definitions, see table 1.

Figure 2. Mean Public Enrollments in US between 1870-1930, 1930 boxed in black (Meyer, Public Education as Nation-Building in America: Enrollments and Bureaucratization in the American States, (1870 – 1930).

Since materials could be transported longer distances and school building projects had increased budgets, architects adopted civic architectural design for schools to physically reflect the future aspirations of the community through ornamentation and materials; they also introduced improved school layouts that separated children in graded groups so that they could learn incrementally. The March 1928 edition of the *Architectural Forum*, a Boston-based architectural magazine, included an announcement that for the third annual Common Brick Building competition, noting that it would shift the competition from homes to schools as school building design was becoming popular and essential to cities. (Figure 3).

<sup>3</sup> Myers, Tyack, Nagel, and Gordon, 1979

*Announcing*

## THE COMMON BRICK SCHOOL BUILDING COMPETITION

*for PHOTOGRAPHS and PLANS of SCHOOL BUILDINGS  
Having Exteriors Constructed of Common Brick\**

**Competition Closes November 6, 1928**

### PRIZES

This Competition and its Prize Awards are divided into two classes, as follows:

**\*\*GRAND PRIZE \$500**  
*for the best building in either class*

CLASS A	CLASS B
FIRST PRIZE ..... \$500	FIRST PRIZE ..... \$500
SECOND PRIZE ..... 250	SECOND PRIZE ..... 250
THIRD PRIZE ..... 100	THIRD PRIZE ..... 100
FOUR HONORABLE MENTIONS 50 EACH	FOUR HONORABLE MENTIONS 50 EACH

\*DEFINITION: A common brick, as defined by the Common Brick Manufacturers' Association of America, and for the purpose of this competition, is a solid building unit of burned clay having a natural surface not treated to produce special effects in color or texture of the individual brick but building "city," "country," and "soft" brick. Types of common brick construction and brick admitted in this competition are explained in the following conditions and in the accompanying booklet.

\*\*This grand prize will be awarded by the jury after selecting the first prize winner in each class. It will be awarded in addition to the first prize, making a total prize of \$1,000 for the best entry in the entire competition.

**T**HE first and second Common Brick House Competitions, held during 1926 and 1927 developed such widespread interest that architects in all parts of the country submitted photographs and plans of many of the finest common brick dwellings that have been erected in recent years. The response from the architectural profession has definitely proved the popularity and value of these competitions.

These two competitions have for the time being quite thoroughly covered the field of house design. It has been decided to conduct a competition in 1928 which will cover the very interesting field of school building design.

All types of school buildings in which the majority of rooms are used for classroom purposes may be entered in this competition, provided 75 per cent of the exterior walls is surfaced with common brick. Small or large school buildings have an equal chance to win the award. In this competition for the prizes have been divided into two classes, as given below, Class "A" calling for buildings of limited volume, and Class "B" permitting the entry of the larger buildings which necessarily offer the architect a broader opportunity for fine treatments of mass and detail than is generally accorded the designer of small structures. A grand prize is offered, which will be awarded to the first prize winner in either class whose entry is judged the finest submitted in the entire competition.

The division of school buildings and prizes into two classes is made on the following basis:

*Class A—School buildings having an actual cubic foot volume not exceeding 700,000 cubic feet.*

*Class B—School buildings having a cubic foot volume in excess of 700,000 cubic feet.*

It should be noted that the buildings shall be those used predominantly for class-room purposes, which excludes structures used solely as dormitories, libraries, gymnasiums, and other accessory buildings. It would include, however, buildings which may contain these facilities as accessories to space devoted primarily to instruction purposes. The competition is open to public, parochial, and private school buildings and buildings for preparatory schools, colleges and universities, falling within the limitation above defined.

This third Common Brick Competition, like the preceding competitions, is quite simple in its nature, because instead of sketch plans requiring extensive drafting-room work and new creative designing, it calls for photographs and floor plans of school buildings already constructed or which may be completed in time to submit the required stories before the closing date, NOVEMBER 6, 1928. From the point of view of the architect, it should prove to be an interesting type of competition because it requires comparatively little time, the project revolving itself into the simple procedure of obtaining good photographs and submitting them with floor plans and the cubic footage.

*Send for Complete Announcement and Program Containing All  
Conditions of the Competition*

*This competition closes NOVEMBER 6, 1928 and is conducted by*  
**THE COMMON BRICK MANUFACTURERS' ASSOCIATION of AMERICA**  
Guarantee Title Building, Cleveland, Ohio

Figure 3. 1927 American Brick competition for School Building Design (Architectural Forum 1927).

### Space allocation

Space allocation debates were happening for public school buildings as well as religious school buildings and classrooms. Henry Edward Tralle and George Earnest Merrill (architects) wrote a book in 1926 about school design in religious architecture called *Building for Religious Education*. In this book, they discuss their findings on best practices for successful schools within a religious building. These findings included specific dimensions such as: Fifteen square feet as an average

allowance of floor-space that is necessary for each pupil in the church school, school day schedules and timing for pupils to be in certain spaces, layout of classrooms and auditoriums, and other aspects. <sup>4</sup>

In 1928, Tralle conducted a series of tests in different religious schools that further confirmed the 15 feet rule to excel academically. For auditoriums, the author recommended seven square feet of space around each seat as more students were confined in one space. <sup>5</sup>

A larger school also allowed for libraries to store educational materials such as books, and children could have spaces to eat lunch inside and away from their classrooms.

### **Building Materials and Structure**

The large number of school buildings being built, and the high enrollment correlate closely with the urbanization of cities across the country from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This building boom was also made possible by increased funding for school districts and schools across the nation during this period.

Prior to the increase of brick, stone, and steel for school construction, schoolhouses and buildings in the Eastern U.S. were typically built with wood. These early school buildings were simply built with local materials that could be easily and cheaply obtained. As railroad transportation expanded across the country, materials like brick, cut stone, and steel could be shipped to school projects from long distances. Steel frames replaced wood and were then covered with brick or stone. For

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Edward Tralle, "Building for Religious Education," Internet Archive, January 1, 1970, <https://archive.org/details/buildingforrelig0000tral/page/22/mode/2up?q=school>, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Henry E. Tralle, *Pencil Points Periodical*. New York. Reinhold Publishing Corporation. 1928. PDF

example, an August 1928 article in *Pencil Points* periodical featured a California school built with stucco and brick veneer.<sup>6</sup>

Larger school populations meant increased capacity of school building, and these two - to four - story structures required new engineering techniques and design. A typical urban junior high school in the late 1920's could house upwards of 2,000 students (Figure 4).

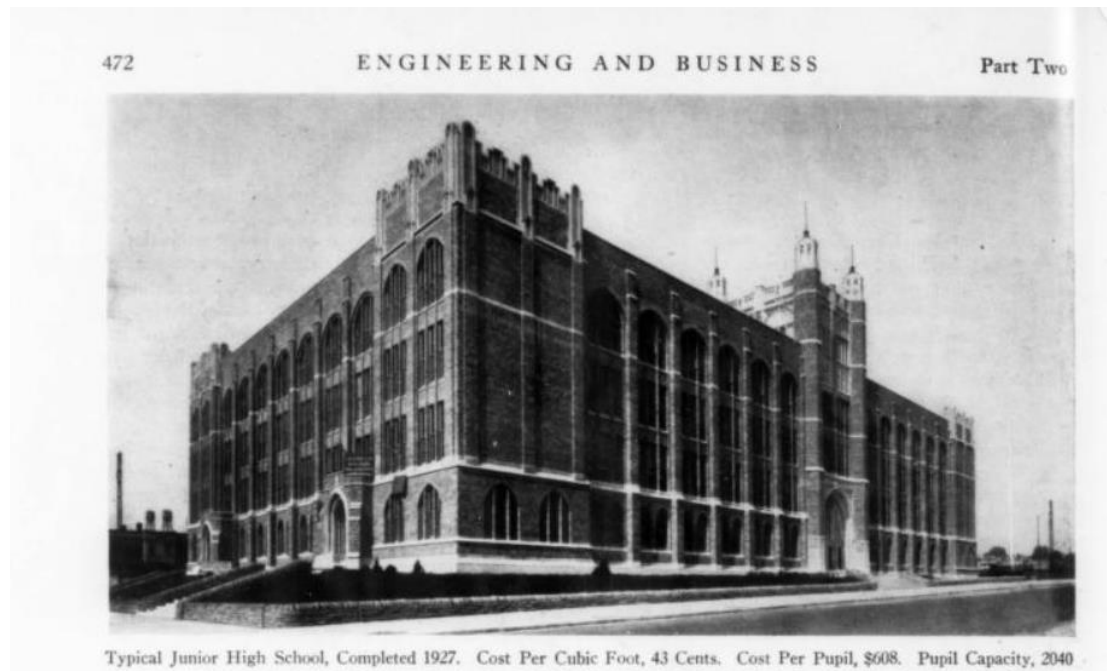


Figure 4. Typical city Junior High School in 1927 *Architectural Forum Journal* 1927.

School architects noted that a typical high school could have over 100 classroom units for a variety of subjects and trades, a large auditorium, restrooms, and cafeteria. These large-scale schools also needed updated safety equipment and utilized the fireproof materials that were being developed during this time. More windows were added to classrooms as they could help with air circulation and light. Figure 5 shows a classroom design with larger windows.

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<sup>6</sup> *Pencil Points*, Volume 24, Issue 3, New York, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1928. PDF

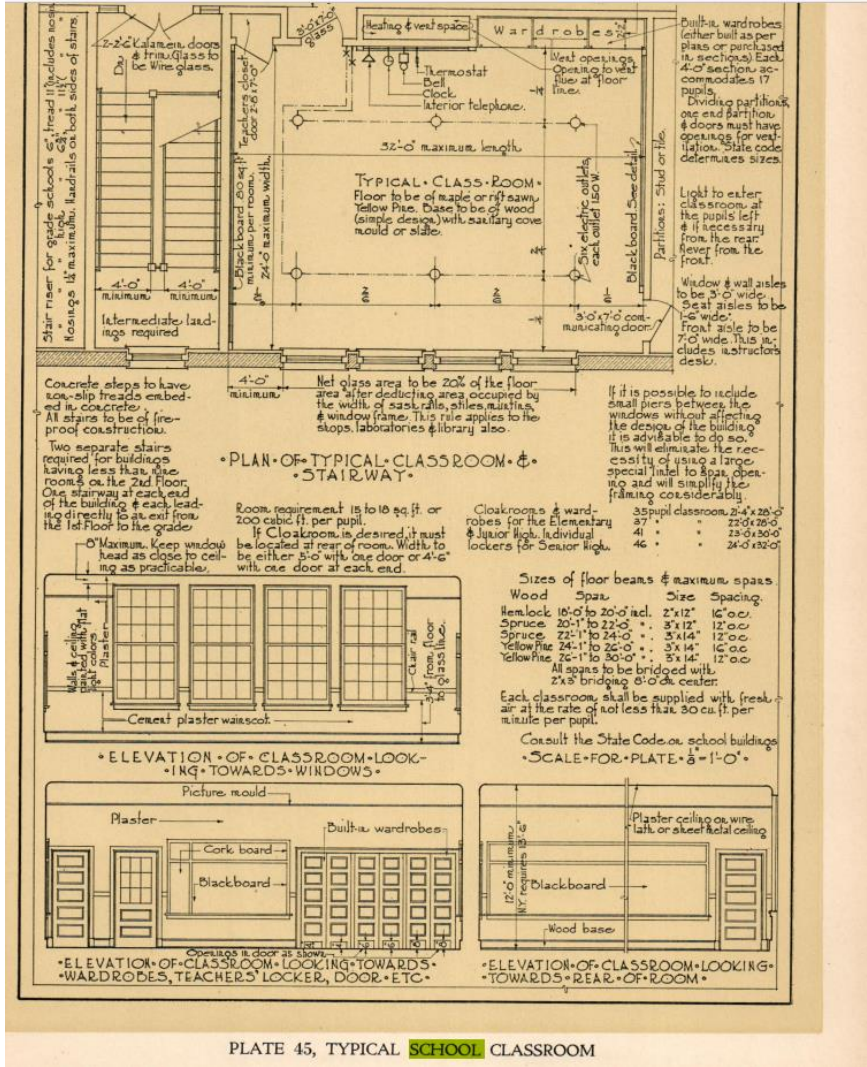


PLATE 45, TYPICAL SCHOOL CLASSROOM

Figure 5. Increased windows in classroom *Architectural Forum* 1928.

Fireproof materials for schools became a priority as at least 5 school buildings were destroyed by fire every day in 1927 due to construction with flammable materials.<sup>7</sup> In the Philadelphia architectural periodical, *The Pencil Point*, there are advertisements for interior walls and ceiling treatment called Padlock that would protect the school from excessive moisture and prevent condensation from the cooling system, along with fire safety door latches, and other safety features. Figure 6

<sup>7</sup> *Architectural Forum*, Volume 48 Issue 3, New York, 1927. PDF

shows a non-fire-resistant wall bearing plan to a similar plan using some fire resistant material, and then a building with fire resistant materials.

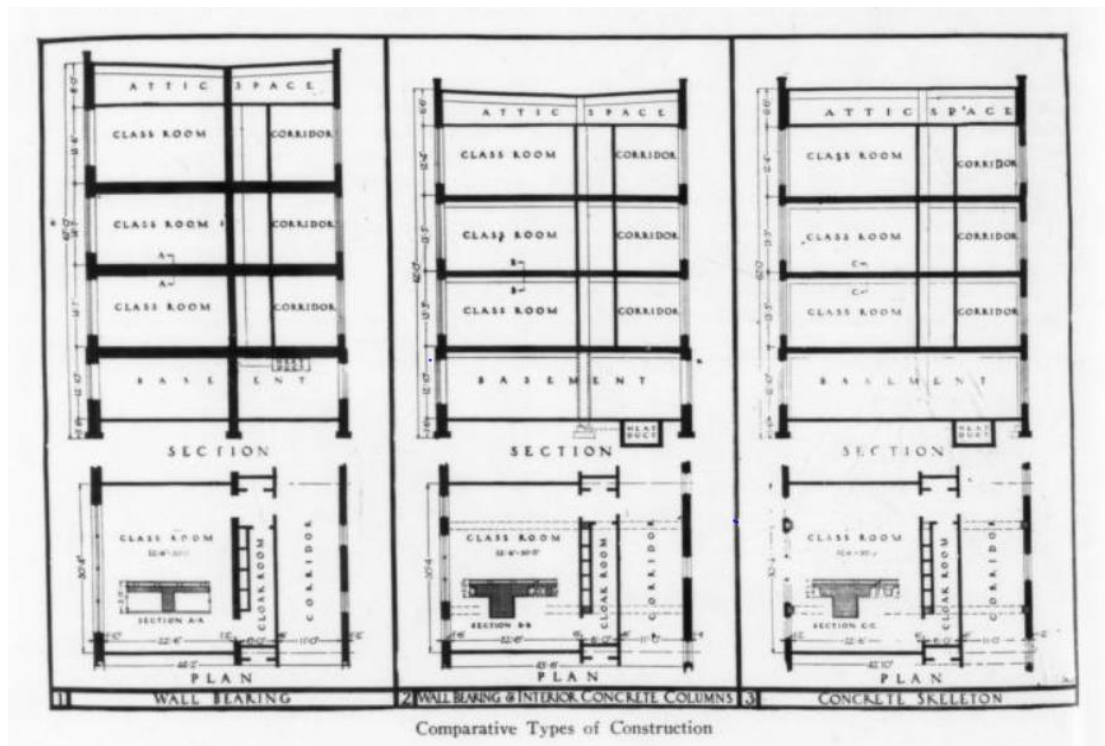


Figure 6. Fire Retardant construction vs non fire retardant classroom *Architectural Forum*, 1928.

### Rehabilitation and Adaptive Reuse of Schools

Historic school buildings and other large institutional buildings struggled to survive into the present day because of decreasing school age populations, high maintenance costs, declining school funding, and were often seen as valuable real estate for other more profitable uses. Over the past several decades, closed and vacant school buildings have been repurposed as condominiums, apartments, senior living facilities, and workspaces for artists.<sup>8</sup> While useful projects, in that they often provide much needed housing, these uses turned public, community assets into private spaces with little public access and engagement.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Grimmer, “Converting Historic School Buildings for Residential Use” Secretary of Interior Bulletin through National Park Service. PDF

## **Adaptive Reuse**

Historic school building rehabilitation projects are mostly residential projects as they fulfill the growing need for housing in larger cities. The layout of classrooms and common spaces such as gymnasiums can easily be converted into common areas or apartments.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, school building preservation and rehabilitation projects that bring them up to code to reuse as school buildings are quite unique.

Preservation Pennsylvania, the statewide nonprofit that protects the state's historic resources, modified their policy on historic school projects after fighting with developers who wanted to demolish the buildings in favor of new construction. Their new policy was that if the building could no longer be a school, it had to find a new use. They supported the community - centered neighborhood school use. In Philadelphia, historic school building rehabilitation projects have become residential projects as well as office spaces and art studios.

An example of a historic school becoming residential housing was West Philadelphia High. The gothic style 1912 school was rehabilitated into a 300-unit apartment building in 2017. A technical school became a commercial space with a rooftop bar. An old Seminary became a museum that uses modern technology inside the building's historic interior. These rehabilitation and reuse projects prompted more research into student work on this topic regarding school buildings.

In her final project, "Historic Schools in Washington, D.C.: Preserving a Rich Heritage," Gabriella Harris presents a history of the development of urban schools

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<sup>9</sup> PBS. WHYY Interview. "[Pennsylvania cities find creative new uses for old school buildings](#)"

and offers examples of the reuse of school buildings in the nation's capital. The District of Columbia (DC) had a variety of schools leading up to the 1930. For example, students in 1857 often had classes in church basements and rented houses. There were four districts during the 1850's in DC where each district had one two-story school. The post-Civil War period witnessed an increase in community wide interest to invest in public education and school buildings. Schools in DC became multistory structures with upwards of ten classrooms. These schools were also constructed with brick and often had multiple entrances with modern heating and ventilation.<sup>10</sup>

Many of these school examples were reworked into housing or other uses such as an office building. Historic reuse of buildings began in DC as saving the entire building's structure with a different use. As the DC population grew and space became more valuable, developers began only keeping the historic façade of buildings to retain the historic physical fabric of the neighborhood but creating a modern interior. Interestingly, the District of Columbia has had one of the highest amounts of school adaptive reuse projects in the United States in 2017. The map below highlights adaptively reused schools in diamond points across the country from 1990 – 2008.

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<sup>10</sup> Gabriella Harris, "Historic Schools in Washington, D.C.: Preserving a Rich Heritage." Masters Final Project. 2008.

**Exhibit 3-1** Adaptively Reused Churches and Schools

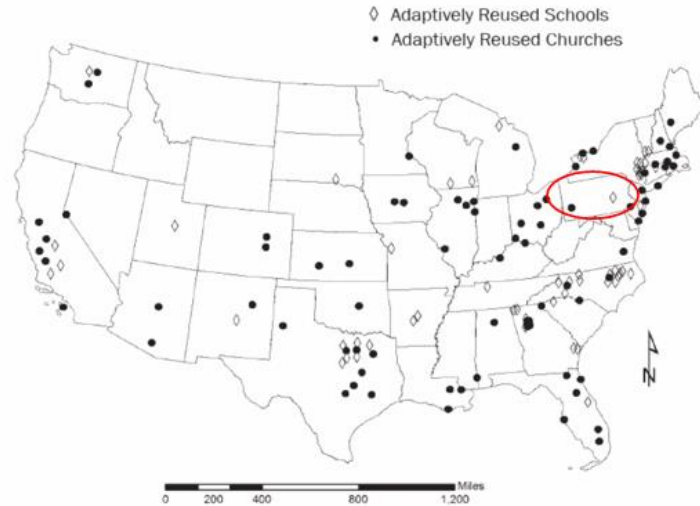


Figure 7. Case study map of 209 Adaptively Reused Churches and Schools across the continental United States from 1990-2008 (Simmons).

Vaux, our case study is in Pennsylvania, circled in red. Interestingly, there was only one adaptively reused school in this 2008 case study. Recently, there have been other rehabilitation school projects. In the 2021- 2022 Fiscal Year, Philadelphia Historic Tax Credits awarded two school structures.

The Bishop Boyle High School in Homestead, Allegheny County had a \$150,000 tax credit allocation. An estimated \$2,300,000 of rehabilitation expenditures converted the school building into apartment use in the Homestead Historic District. Likewise, the Gladstone School in Pittsburgh, Allegheny County was awarded a \$300,000 tax credit allocation. An estimated \$16,000,000 of rehabilitation expenditures to rehabilitate the vacant school into affordable housing and community space. This school became listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2021.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Philadelphia Area Employment. October 2022. [https://www.bls.gov/regions/mid-atlantic/news-release/AreaEmployment\\_Philadelphia.htm](https://www.bls.gov/regions/mid-atlantic/news-release/AreaEmployment_Philadelphia.htm).

## Chapter 3: The Challenges of Philadelphia Schools and its Historic School Buildings

### **Introduction**

This chapter will provide a brief history of Philadelphia schools, particularly focusing on declining enrollment, unsafe conditions, and funding and deferred maintenance problems, and will then examine school closings in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. This chapter will also provide a context for historic school buildings in Philadelphia drawing on several studies and National Register nominations.

### **Brief History of Philadelphia Schools**

Philadelphia schools have struggled to maintain enrollment numbers for older public schools in the city. Before the closure of 23 schools in 2012-2013 school year, Philadelphia schools had high student populations as the city had a large school age population. As families moved to suburbs and elsewhere, the city schools suffered. The school district had too many buildings to maintain and not enough students to fill them. This also raised school funding concerns with tax revenue declining. To compensate for a tighter budget, schools with low enrollment, struggling academic performance and costly renovations were closed during this wave. Additionally, a maintenance backlog of repairs such as: HVAC units, roof repairs, lead in drinking water, and asbestos exposure has exacerbated the longevity issue of these historic schools. While some schools have reopened as newer schools in the past 8 years, unsafe school conditions have become a health and safety concern for parents and

faculty. Elementary, middle, and high schools have continued to close around Philadelphia in 2023 due to these issues, specifically asbestos.<sup>12</sup>

### **School closings and neighborhood impact**

Philadelphia has experienced population growth and declines across its neighborhoods over the years. Many neighborhoods became segregated by race and income with some having concentrations of low household income and poverty. Neighborhood schools in these low-income neighborhoods often had high teacher turnover, outdated or fewer resources, and low advancement to higher education as teenagers were needed to work or provide childcare for their parents.<sup>13</sup>

### **School Closings**

Philadelphia's African American population rose due to white flight between 1920s – 1940s. In the 1950s and 1960s, North Philadelphia experienced an influx of African American and other families which led to overcrowding of schools. Many of these school facilities were built during the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century and could not accommodate the larger student population. However, as larger facilities were constructed, enrollment began to decline. Due to this ebb and flow, school closures occurred in the 1970's and 1980's.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kristen A. Graham., "Another Philly School Is Closing Because of Asbestos." Philadelphia Inquirer. May 22, 2023. <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-school-district-asbestos-henry-closed-20230422.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "School Closing Moving Ahead But..." 2013 [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/education/20130310\\_A\\_Snapshot\\_\\_The\\_23\\_Closing\\_Schools\\_in\\_Philadelphia.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/education/20130310_A_Snapshot__The_23_Closing_Schools_in_Philadelphia.html)

<sup>14</sup> Ariel Bierbaum, "Shifting Landscapes of Power and Privilege: School Closures and Uneven Development in Philadelphia. UC Berkeley." (PhD Dissertation, UC Berkley, 2016), 23, ProQuest (Bierbaum\_berkeley\_0028E\_16562).

## **Neighborhood Impact**

Once a school is closed, students must travel farther to an open school that their parents feel content with. This puts pressure on the newer school as they are burdened with more students in a limited space with limited resources. School closures also result in vacant, deteriorating buildings that can become havens for drug use and dangerous for neighborhood resides. These vacant spaces also provide neighborhoods with a powerful, physical message of loss and abandonment by government.

Schools that are closed are often adapted into residential buildings or less often for office spaces - clearly serving other community needs but generally converting a public use space to a private use. Vaux is a unique case as it was bought after its closure with the intent of preserving its original function as a school and public community space.

The neighborhood suffered many vacancies as both Vaux and Reynolds Elementary schools closed during this time. Over 26% of the neighborhood buildings were vacant and many more abandoned due to the inability to maintain them.<sup>15</sup>

## **Philadelphia School Buildings**

The historic schools in Philadelphia were designed by well-known city architects and accommodate various grades from elementary to high school. The schools have been documented Federally through National Register of Historic Places nominations that include architectural scale drawings and locally with the Philadelphia Schools thematic study. These buildings were recognized as important

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<sup>15</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "School Closing Moving Ahead But..." 2013  
[https://www.inquirer.com/philly/education/20130310\\_A\\_Snapshot\\_The\\_23\\_Closing\\_Schools\\_in\\_Philadelphia.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/education/20130310_A_Snapshot_The_23_Closing_Schools_in_Philadelphia.html)

buildings principally for their architectural significance and association with a famous architect. There are three common architectural styles of Philadelphia schools. These include the following:

**Art Deco/ Moderne (1920- 1940):** Art Deco is a style that arose after the 1920's and is known for mixing metals, flat roof, smooth wall surface, vertical projections, geometric and stylized motifs, and the facade is usually asymmetrical. There is also a vertical emphasis.<sup>16</sup>

**Collegiate Gothic (1910-1950):** This is a subgenre of gothic revival specifically for religious and educational institutions. They had recessed entryways, vertical projections, large fenestrations, stone or stone colored wall surface, and small ornate panels. They were innovative with steel, plaster, stone tile, and gypsum materials.<sup>17</sup>

**Regency:** Focuses on the symmetrical and proportional details like the Georgian style of architecture.

In both the thematic study of 1980 and the Philadelphia Public Schools Multiple Property nomination, an architectural description of Vaux with its character defining architectural features is the main evidence for significance. There is also a statement that this was the first building by architect Irwin Catherine of this particular U shaped design. Vaux Big Picture school is listed as an excellent example of the Art Deco/Moderne style.

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<sup>16</sup> Virginia McAlester. "A Field Guide to American Houses". 580.

<sup>17</sup> Washington State Preservation. Architectural Style Guide. Web. [Collegiate Gothic | Washington State Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation \(DAHP\)](#)

## Chapter 4: Vaux Big Picture High School

### Introduction

Drawing on the context of school architecture in Chapter 2 and on Philadelphia Schools as presented in Chapter 3, this chapter provides a brief history of the Vaux School, discusses its original design and construction, and examines its neighborhood setting up to its closing in 2012.

### History of the building

In 1910, the property at 2300 Master Street that would become the Vaux School held a stable and baking company (Figure 7).<sup>18</sup> By 1934, the property was vacant based the 1934 J. M. Brewer appraisal map.<sup>19</sup> The school was built between 1936 and 1938 and designed by architect Irwin T. Catherine. The four story building can be seen during the construction stage in Figure 8.

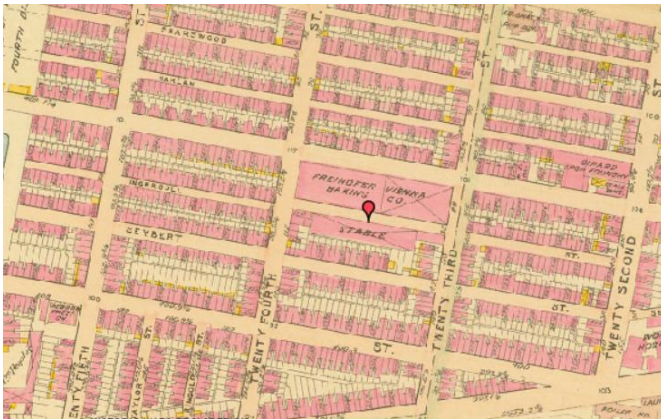


Figure 8. 1910 Philadelphia Atlas (G.W. Bromley) Philadelphia GeoHistory Layer on Philadelphia

Architects and Buildings [https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj\\_display\\_map.cfm/87891](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj_display_map.cfm/87891)

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<sup>18</sup> Philadelphia Architects and Buildings. Accessed in November 2022

[https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj\\_display\\_map.cfm/87891](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj_display_map.cfm/87891)

<sup>19</sup> J.M. Brewer Appraisal Map, 1934. Map. <https://www.philageohistory.org/tiles/viewer/>



Figure 9. Robert Vaux High School in construction on July 26, 1937. Philadelphia Department of Records (Online) Asset ID: 49079.

Architect Catherine designed this school with steel framing and brick and terracotta cladding. The completed school is shown on a 1942 Works Progress Administration (WPA) map (Figure 9). At its opening in 1939, Vaux had about 300 students. At the peak of its enrollment in 1992, Vaux had about 960 students.

Select base map:



Figure 10. Vaux shown on the Works Public Administration Map (1942 WPA map, Philly GeoHistory Layer).

After almost 70 years of operation, Vaux experienced its first major renovation project in 2006 and 2007. Carried out by Domus Construction, several major improvements were made to the school. The old gymnasium was converted into a digital music suite and an interactive media center. A new HVAC system was installed to provide better air exchange and air conditioning to the building's 40 classrooms and offices. The gymnasium was moved to the second floor of the building. Directly below the classroom, a covered parking garage was built for faculty and staff. This was a brand-new feature to the school and provided a safer environment for teachers. Four existing classrooms were converted into specialty suites including a music suite, computer-assisted drafting room, business room, and nursing certification room.

These renovations were made to improve the building and provide incentives to increase the student population and decrease student dropouts. The idea was that the new spaces and course offerings would provide new employment opportunities for students. Principal Sandra Pearson hoped that the nursing certification program would provide real life experience and job networking after graduation. An international commercial driving license program and Microsoft accreditation were developed in that hopes they would encourage students to stay at Vaux. Principal Pearson mentioned that students' attendance in those programs has increased the renovations, but these numbers were not high enough to keep the school open.

According to the Philadelphia school district, the average student daily attendance at Vaux in 1992 was 85.2%. By the start of the renovation project in 2006, that number had dropped to 79.4% and enrollment had declined to 289 students. After

the first day of class in the newly renovated school, 135 students withdrew from the school because of inability to pay additional costs for the specialized programs or wanted to change schools.

The 2006/2007 renovation was funded by the Philadelphia School Improvements program and the school reform commission. Since the projects were directly funded by the school reform commissions, the process seemed largely driven by government and political interests rather than community needs.

During several reform efforts in the early 2010's, the school was known as The Promise Academy at Robert Vaux High School and Robert Vaux Promise Academy. In 2013-2014, Vaux closed with a school population of just 280 students - fewer than it had when it opened in 1939.

### **Architectural Design and Structure**

The Robert Vaux High School is a four story, U-shaped, yellow brick building with 23 bays. The building is stylistically characterized as the Art Deco/Moderne Style. The building features a two-story stone Tudor arched entryway with colorful windows. There are terracotta decorative elements throughout the building as well as projecting end pavilions.<sup>20</sup>

The Vaux School was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 under Criterion B for its association with architect Catherine and Criterion C for its distinctive architectural features. As noted above, Vaux was also included in the Philadelphia Schools thematic study in 1980. The four story brick and terracotta building were added was included as a National Register of Historic Places

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<sup>20</sup> National Register of Historic Places. Robert Vaux High School. November 18, 1988. Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/4e77da0e-4b1f-46fa-bb8f-9b7bb7bd9eb7/>

contributing building to multiple property nomination titled” Philadelphia Public Schools” in 1988.<sup>21</sup>

While the National Register nomination talks at length about what the building looks like and its general purpose, very little is written about the social and cultural development and activity of the school and its neighborhood. The nomination argued primarily for its significance due to its architectural design and style and the building’s association with architect Irwin T. Catherine. The nomination did not explore how the school design reflected the architectural push for improved building conditions suitable for young children, examine the context of the surrounding community, or indicate that it was a neighborhood-centered school.

The architect of Robert Vaux High School, Irwin Thorton Catherine (1844–1944), was Philadelphia’s Superintendent of Building from 1918- 1937. He received his degree in Architecture from Drexel University.<sup>22</sup> His father, Joseph Catherine, was the city of Philadelphia’s Solicitor from 1894 until 1900, when he was appointed a member of Philadelphia’s Board of Education. An advocate for education, he was also chair of the Board of Education.<sup>23</sup> During Catherine’s term as Superintendent of Building, he supervised 104 new school projects within the Philadelphia city limits, oversaw additions for 25 schools, and renovated at least 50 schools.<sup>24</sup>

Irwin Catherine and others advocated that schools should have the best public health and safety solutions for the future generations. Catherine wrote an article in the

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<sup>21</sup> Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey form. School District of Philadelphia. October 8, 1988. Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/71993510>

<sup>22</sup> About Irwin Catherine. The Architectural Forum Vol. 48 Issue 3 [https://archive.org/details/sim\\_architectural-forum\\_1928-03\\_48\\_3](https://archive.org/details/sim_architectural-forum_1928-03_48_3)

<sup>23</sup> University of Pennsylvania. Kislak Center for Special Collections, Biography of Joseph W. Catharine. Web. [https://findingaids.library.upenn.edu/records/UPENN\\_RBML\\_PUSP.MS.COLL.1232](https://findingaids.library.upenn.edu/records/UPENN_RBML_PUSP.MS.COLL.1232)

<sup>24</sup> Philadelphia School Theme Study. 1986. [https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/NRHP/64000730\\_text](https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/NRHP/64000730_text)

*Architectural Forum*'s 1928 edition on the costs of school buildings and their layouts. He advocated for indoor toilets, cafeterias for children to eat in school instead of going home for food, many classrooms that could be used for educational and trade classes, and a large auditorium.<sup>25</sup>

Fireproof materials for schools became a priority during this period as at least 5 school buildings burned to the ground each day (1927) due to the use of non-fireproof materials. In reaction, Catherine used steel and concrete framing for his school buildings.<sup>26</sup> Catherine also pointed out that many Philadelphia district schools were in less-than-ideal locations, being surrounded by overcrowded alleyways and slums, and many did not have toilets inside the school building.<sup>27</sup> He felt strongly that schools needed to provide all necessary sanitation and health facilities.

### **Neighborhood/Stakeholders**

Sharswood is the neighborhood in North Philadelphia that is home to Vaux Big Picture School. Beginning in the 1860s, this working-class neighborhood consisted of German immigrants. These immigrants built two- and three-story row homes, worked in newly established factories, and worshipped in new churches as Philadelphia city expanded north. Sharswood is one mile east of the Brewerytown neighborhood, named after its concentration of local breweries that supplied jobs to a majority of German immigrants during the 1880's.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Tralle, Henry Edward. Auditoriums. *The Architectural Forum*. Vol. 48 Issue 3  
[https://archive.org/details/sim\\_architectural-forum\\_1928-03\\_48\\_3\\_0](https://archive.org/details/sim_architectural-forum_1928-03_48_3_0)

<sup>26</sup> Catherine, Irwin. "Cost of Construction." *The Architectural Forum*. Vol. 48 Issue 3  
[https://archive.org/details/sim\\_architectural-forum\\_1928-03\\_48\\_3\\_0](https://archive.org/details/sim_architectural-forum_1928-03_48_3_0)

<sup>27</sup> Catherine, Irwin. "Cost of Construction." *The Architectural Forum*. Vol. 48 Issue 3  
[https://archive.org/details/sim\\_architectural-forum\\_1928-03\\_48\\_3\\_0](https://archive.org/details/sim_architectural-forum_1928-03_48_3_0)

<sup>28</sup> Cook, Daniel Thomas. Vernacular Faith, Community and Heritage  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15365042221083010>

During 1930-1940, Sharswood's population witnessed an influx of African American community members due to the post World War I Great Migration from the south to find better jobs and affordable housing. One cultural development in the neighborhood was the establishment of a vibrant Jazz scene along Columbia Avenue that became known as the "Golden Strip." This area extended down Ridge Avenue with the establishment of the Pearl Theater and other entertainment amenities such as hotels, restaurants, and nightclubs.

North Philadelphia became segregated and this tension culminated in the race riots of 1965. After these uprisings, many businesses closed or left the area. This led to the eventual erasure of the commercial corridors in Sharswood. Population and employment in Sharswood declined from the 1870's to 1980's as middle-class Philadelphians left for the suburbs. This led to a high number of vacancies in the neighborhood.<sup>29</sup>

### **Pressures to Neighborhood**

Sharswood has always suffered from crime and violence.<sup>30</sup> The neighborhood faced immense pressure for housing "development" as Temple University (west of Sharswood) attempted to expand their economic and cultural footprint beyond their main Broad Street campus.<sup>31</sup> Housing conditions in the neighborhood deteriorated despite the campus development around the neighborhood. School age children in the neighborhood had few options due to a lack of after school programs.

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<sup>29</sup> Historic Preservation Studio 2015 University of Pennsylvania. Bauman, Public Housing 2012.PDF

<sup>30</sup>WHYY. "Hopes for North Philly Neighborhood's Future Tethered to New High School." Accessed November 12, 2022. <https://whyy.org/articles/19amvaux-2/>.

<sup>31</sup> Vernacular Faith, Community and Heritage.

In May of 2012, Philadelphia Housing Authority unveiled the completion of the Norris Apartments, LEED apartments that were part of a transit-oriented development. These apartments were meant to bring energy efficient housing to North Philadelphia.<sup>32</sup>

The closing of Vaux High School and Reynolds Elementary in 2013-2014 was a further blow to an already devastated community. Following its closure, Vaux students were enrolled in Strawberry Mansion High School and Benjamin Franklin High School, both located outside the neighborhood. Residents talked about the mental stress of being denied schools in their neighborhoods and how it affected students' ability to focus on schoolwork. Crime rates also increased during this time.<sup>33</sup> Figures 11 – 14 are photos taken of Vaux's condition in 2013 by a photographer participating in a community project to document all the schools that were closing in Philadelphia.

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<sup>32</sup> Philadelphia Housing Authority. "Sharswood Blumberg Transformation." 2021. <https://www.pha.phila.gov/business-opportunities/development-initiatives/sharswood-blumberg-transformation/>

<sup>33</sup> WHYY. "Pennsylvania Cities Find Creative New Uses for Old School Buildings." Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://whyy.org/articles/pennsylvania-cities-find-creative-new-uses-for-old-school-buildings/>.



Figure 11. Vaux exterior deterioration in 2013 (Photo by Tieshka Smith).



Figure 12. Vaux classroom 2013 example (Photo by Tieshka Smith).



Figure 13. Save Vaux banner (Photo by Tieshka Smith).

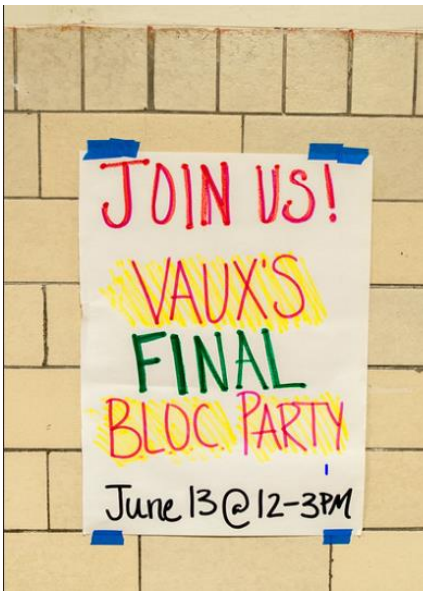


Figure 14. Vaux final bloc party (Photo by Tieshka Smith).



Figure 15. Vaux entrance 2013 (Photo by Tieshka Smith).

## Chapter 5: Renewal, Rehabilitation, and Reuse

### **Introduction**

The discussion of the school's history and architecture in the previous chapter establish Vaux school's important place in the community. This chapter presents the planning work intended to transform the Sharswood neighborhood and examines the important place of the school in those plans. The chapter then details the rehabilitation of the school, and the plans for its reuse, and ends with a discussion of the current school facility and its partners.

### **Transforming a Neighborhood**

In the early 2000's the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative saw the demolition of thousands of abandoned city row homes, leaving 35 acres of vacant lots in Sharswood. In response, the neighborhood has recently begun a process of reclaiming the land for themselves, establishing community gardens and public spaces on many of the abandoned lots. One example of a community garden is the Philly Peace Park, located on 2200 W Jefferson St, in Philadelphia. The garden was originally started to provide fresh produce to the community. The park hosts volunteer work days and mental health self-care days every Sunday. Annual events at the park include the Black Market and the Philly Village Building Convergence during June or July. Fall Festivals and school supply drives occur in early September every year. Each of these events include both a food and education component. There is a family meal of dishes made with the garden's harvests and educational workshops and speakers.<sup>34</sup> While there were fears of the garden shutting down due to

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<sup>34</sup> Peace Philly Park. Web. Accessed September 2022. <https://www.phillypeacepark.org/>

the PHA acquiring it and placing a fence around it, the community was relieved when the garden was moved a few blocks down from its original location. The garden is one way that the Sharswood neighborhood is striving to create a better future for the community.

### **Choice Neighborhood**

The Sharswood neighborhood was designated as a choice neighborhood after the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) received a choice neighborhood planning grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2013. The choice neighborhood plan included creating new affordable housing, a central headquarters for the Philadelphia Housing Authority, and a resolve to rehabilitate Vaux Big Picture to provide the area with a local school.

The HUD (The US Department of Housing and Urban Development) choice neighborhood program utilizes public and private funding to provide community driven strategies that will address distressed public housing and overall neighborhood transformation.

A choice neighborhood focuses on these three goals<sup>35</sup>:

1. **Housing:** Replace distressed public and assisted housing with high-quality mixed-income housing that is well-managed and responsive to the needs of the surrounding neighborhood;
2. **People:** Improve outcomes of households living in the target housing related to employment and income, health, and children's education; and

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<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Choice Neighborhood. Web. Accessed April 2023 <https://www.hud.gov/cn>

3. **Neighborhood:** Create the conditions necessary for public and private reinvestment in distressed neighborhoods to offer the kinds of amenities and assets, including safety, good schools, and commercial activity, that are important to families' choices about their community.

The rehabilitation and reopening of Vaux School falls under Goal #2 to improve children's health and education, and under Goal #3 to provide good schools. The stakeholders in this choice neighborhood include: public housing authority, business owners, residents, local political leaders, nonprofits (Big Picture School), and private developers.

The plan developed for Sharswood includes new apartments and affordable housing, the relocation of the PHA headquarters to the neighborhood, and the rehabilitation of Vaux School.

The PHA proposed to demolish any abandoned and unusable buildings in order to build new apartments that can be used for affordable housing. There is also a plan to revitalize existing apartments to incentivize more renters. Finally, there are goals for more common green spaces, parking, driveways, fixing older houses, and more.

The PHA has also announced that North Philadelphia would be the location for their new headquarters. This move will change the neighborhood dynamic and create more traffic and visitors to the neighborhood.

The master plan for the neighborhood also calls for transportation improvements with bus routing, parking, and other transportation related services. It will also address sanitation issues due to a lack of trash receptacles and trash on the

streets and will tackle the limited number of food and general stores in the neighborhood. The library will have improved resources such as more computers and more hours.

The community has expressed a real need for actual job placement after trainings. While Vaux has attempted to solve this problem through partnerships with companies and hospitals, there is a need for a job mentoring program.

The other major part of the plan included the rehabilitation and reopening of Vaux School. In 2017, the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) purchased the building for 2 million dollars with the hopes of rehabilitating and reopening the school. The PHA ultimately spent \$15 million in renovations. Big Picture Learning provided part of the funding as well as helped set up the school to reopen for 9th graders.

Big Picture Learning is a nonprofit organization that focuses on equitable and student-centered learning that utilizes in person schooling with outside internships and mentorships. Vaux is a contract school but is still run by the district. School funds are coming from both the district and Big Picture Learning. The program at Vaux uses a combination of in person learning and two days in the community doing internship work. On the Big Picture Learning website, Vaux Big Picture is listed as a Big Picture Learning school as well as providing an online internship management system app I'm Blaze that enables students to search for internship opportunities that align with their interests.

## **Rehabilitating Vaux School**

The Sharswood neighborhood needed a neighborhood school as many displaced students suffered academically in their newer schools. The Philadelphia Housing Authority recognized that many major changes would need to push this neighborhood towards positive improvements. A few of these changes included finding ways to increase job opportunities for all working adults, create opportunities for food and housing stability, and introduce a mentoring program for the youth to gain real life job experiences.

The community needs were incorporated in the 2015 neighborhood choice plan. Even though there was not much community input into the rehabilitation of the school, PHA included the specialized rooms as well as space for other partners to use the school's square footage for enrichment programs.

The addition of Big Picture Learning highlighted a public-school function that had been a forgotten focus of Philadelphia Schools. In 1911, District President Henry R. Edmunds declared, There's "a new conception of the functions of the public school. There was a time when the public school was regarded as being simply a place for scholastic instruction. ... To-day, a multitude of interests are being cared for by the public school system which no one dreamed of...medical inspection, vocational training, music, physical training, social centers, open air classes, evening lectures to adults, school gardens and summer playgrounds. ... There is a growing tendency for the community to regard the school as the center of much of its social life." Of course, Edmunds added, "these things cannot be done without money, and that

ultimately it rests with the people to pay the bill.”<sup>36</sup> This same sentiment of community centered interests being inside Vaux was prioritized with this rehabilitation project. The addition of student enrichment learning within different fields created more employment and skill building opportunities for students. While this seemed great on paper, the community it was serving had concerns about its success.

After the 2017 purchase of the school, residents had mixed feelings about the Philadelphia Housing Authority’s new presence in the neighborhood. While some residents were glad that the school was able to reopen for the future, other residents were suspicious as PHA helped exacerbate the issues of deteriorating high rise apartments, crime increase, and rent increases. An influx of new residents moved into North Philadelphia, sparking the fears of older residents that they will be pushed out.

The rehabilitation process for Vaux included updating classroom equipment such as chalkboards to dry erase markers, updating hardware and removing jail like bars on the classroom doors, and updating the cafeteria to include colorful décor. Historic architectural features and materials were also given a face lift. This included the restoration of the original terrazzo flooring, and Tudor- arched entrance, and stained-glass window replacements.<sup>37</sup> Big Picture Learning began fostering relationships with Temple University’s nursing program and other educational programs to revitalize the real experience internships that were attempted in the first renovation.

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<sup>36</sup> Philly History Blog. Web. [The Rise and Fall of Philadelphia’s Schools – PhillyHistory Blog](#)

<sup>37</sup> Malcom Burnley. “This Philly Transformation Plan Rethinks the Neighborhood School” October 27, 2017. Accessed November 22, 2022. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/philly-transformation-plan-rethinks-neighborhood-school-180966983/>

With its reopening as the Vaux Big Picture School in 2017, the plan called for the school to add one additional grade each year (Figure 16). Vaux Big Picture started with a 9<sup>th</sup> grade class in 2017 and had its first graduating class in 2020 (Figure 17). One hope of anchoring the neighborhood with a higher performing school is that it could lift poverty levels of residents and educational attainment for of longtime residents.



Figure 16. Vaux Opening Ribbon Cutting Ceremony (Photo by PHA).



Figure 17. Vaux new classroom after rehabilitation (Photo by Nextcity)

### **Reuse and Renewal**

Today, Vaux Big Picture School serves 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade students. As Vaux Big Picture school expanded their grades, they also included more community programs and non-profits throughout the building. Big Picture Learning is responsible for envisioning the community-oriented non-profit occupants, making connections and forming partnerships, and leasing the space to them. The school district manages the building, but Big Picture Learning helps fund immediate maintenance repairs and other items as it directly impacts the student's daily life.

The four-story Art Deco school was designed to accommodate school age children.

The redesign and rehabilitation of the school has held on to the original purpose but

also provided community spaces for several non-profits critical to the community. Each floor layout serves a specific purpose for the building (Figure 18).

The first floor is for administrative work. There are stairs up to the front entrance. Once inside the dual staircase foyer, the visitor will see the visitor center and office, guidance counselor offices, school gymnasium, clinic, and 3 classrooms. The terrazzo floor and arched entryways are visible on this floor. The second floor contains 15 classrooms, restrooms, cafeteria, and science laboratories. This is where NPULSE and Mighty writer's programs are held. The third floor includes 15 classrooms, music rooms, and a few storage areas. The fourth floor has about 4 classrooms and a large space dedicated to the nursing program. This floor also holds the Vaux Community Health Center. These programs are discussed in length in the following paragraphs.

The community-centered and student enrichment learning vision matters for the preservation of the building for two reasons. The first is that the historic building use is being maintained or adapted for the school and community's needs. The second is that the preservation field has expanded notions of value beyond traditional architectural significance to include the multiple values of community members. The field has recognized that sites such as schools and churches are significant social and cultural cornerstones that hold a community's story and traditions. The community-centered learning and vision also aligns with community planning as the field centers planning around the communities and creating long lasting spaces that have community led input and interests at heart.

Today, the building holds the Big Picture School, the Vaux Community Health Center (partnership with Temple University), and two non-profit organizations NPULSE and Mighty Writers.

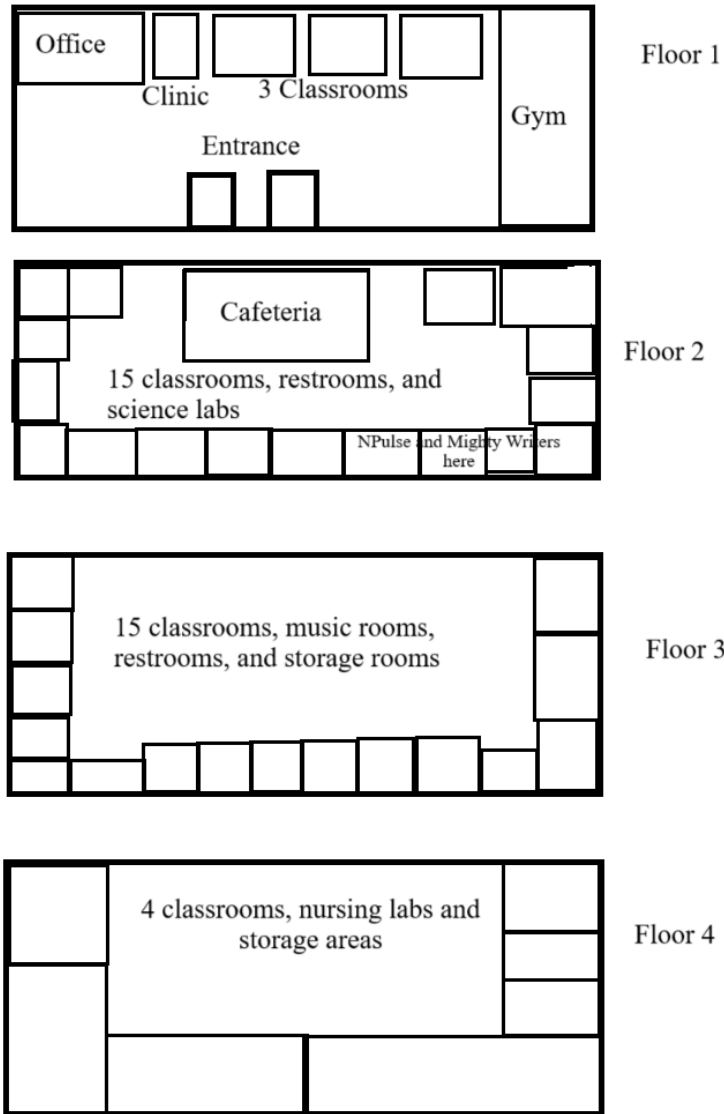


Figure 18. Vaux High School Floor Plans derived from CICADA Architecture/Planning, Inc.’s plans that is included in the appendix. By Author.

NPULSE is located on the first floor, a Mighty Writer's writing center on the second floor for students to utilize, and the community health center is on the fourth floor across from the cafeteria. The Big Picture School has the main entrance on the first floor at the W. Master Street entrance where students must walk through metal detectors and present their ID. Classrooms, special rooms like a wood workshop, music rooms, nursing rooms, special use rooms, and other enrichment activities are in rooms throughout the second, third, and fourth levels.

NPULSE is an urban agricultural business that partners with Creative Tech Works Studio to help students and community members learn about the technological food growth techniques and the process of food growth sustainability. The food growth sustainability process includes planting community gardens, increasing access to fresh food through home gardens, and shopping through local farmers. This location at Vaux created an Urban Leadership, Sustainability & Entrepreneurship (NPULSE) Alliance where Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) workshops that have a focus such as controlled indoor agriculture, engineering design, product R&D, light manufacturing, and food entrepreneurship. Both the students and community members can take these workshops and learn more.<sup>38</sup>

The Mighty Writers occupy a large writing room in the second level Vaux Family Center. The group began in 2015 as a collaboration with the Church of the Advocates, a leader in North Philadelphia advocacy work.<sup>39</sup> Here, specialty teen classes, an afterschool writing academy, and biweekly mighty toddlers programs are

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<sup>38</sup> NPulse. Web. <https://thinkandgrowfarms.com/>

<sup>39</sup> Mighty Writers NW Web.. <https://mightywriters.org/>.

held. The program also specializes in basketball sessions to promote focus and harness self-expression. The writing center and food donation hours have restricted hours from noon until 2pm. Mighty Writers launched a food donation program to provide food, diapers, period products, meals, groceries, books, and other essential items that the neighborhood needs during the pandemic.

The Vaux Community Health Center is a Temple University run clinic that partners with Vaux to provide quality care and health education to the Blumberg/Sharswood neighborhood. The health center includes Vaux nursing students in their staffing to provide realistic training experiences and increase the amount of patients the center can attend to. The center also provides physical therapy services and a type 2 diabetes program.

The success of this rehabilitation lies in its ability to create opportunities for career experience during their studies through community partners with Big Picture Learning.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Historic buildings are successful when they are in use and maintained regularly. Historic school buildings are vehicles for students to learn about the world around them and about the history of their community. The continuation of historic fabric in a neighborhood allows the community to learn how their landscape has changed and provides social and cultural opportunities for diverse stories about the neighborhood and community leaders to surface. The retention of a historic school also allows individuals to connect about their shared experiences during their years there and provide an alumni network that can create job pathways for upcoming graduates. The multi community spaces in a school provide economic and social opportunities both the students and their families. This benefits the future of the community and longevity of the neighborhood.

The school has been able to retain its original function as a school while also incorporating community spaces in its historic footprint. This is a unique case where the housing authority buys a school back after being in disrepair due to the HUD grant and the need for a neighborhood school. By partnering with a student learning organization like Big Picture Learning, the building was able to acquire a larger budget, utilize resources for education and after school enrichment, and connect with the community. This school is partially successful due to Big Picture's funding and involvement.

There are many organizations that work with potential school rehabilitation projects, and many have created pamphlets and guides on ways to set up a successful funding plan to rehabilitate schools as well as provide tips on avoiding project

pitfalls. The pamphlets and resources that were read for this project included: National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities *Historic Neighborhood Schools Deliver 21<sup>st</sup> Century Educations*<sup>40</sup>, 21st Century School Fund's *For Generations to Come: A Leadership Guide to Renewing Public School Buildings*<sup>41</sup>, The Council for Educational Facilities Planner's *A Primer for the Renovation/Rehabilitation of Older and Historic Schools*<sup>42</sup>, the National Trust for Historic Preservation's *A Community Guide to Saving Older Schools*<sup>43</sup>, and finally an example of merging school's history with the student's learning experience is called Memories from Miller (in Pittsburgh).<sup>44</sup>

The lessons that these successful rehabilitation pamphlets discuss, and gleaned from this case study include:

- Utilize community input in what they need and see if there is space in the school to accommodate that need;
- If the school is not performing as well, help teachers and school administrators advocate for the resources that students and schools need;
- Focus on creating a healthy environment for individuals to learn and then prioritize community-centered internships for students to get real-world work experiences and network;

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<sup>40</sup> Constance E. Beaumont, "Historic Neighborhood Schools Deliver 21st Century Educations". 2005. PDF [http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/school-preservation/files/21st\\_century\\_educations.pdf](http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/school-preservation/files/21st_century_educations.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fund. "For Generations to Come: A Leadership Guide to Renewing Public School Buildings" 2002. PDF [https://archive.org/details/ERIC\\_ED499142](https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED499142)

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/school-preservation/information.html>

<sup>43</sup> Kerri Rubman, *A Community Guide to Saving Older Buildings*. 2000. PDF [https://www.phlf.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/A\\_Community\\_Guide\\_To\\_Saving\\_Older\\_Schools.pdf](https://www.phlf.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/A_Community_Guide_To_Saving_Older_Schools.pdf)

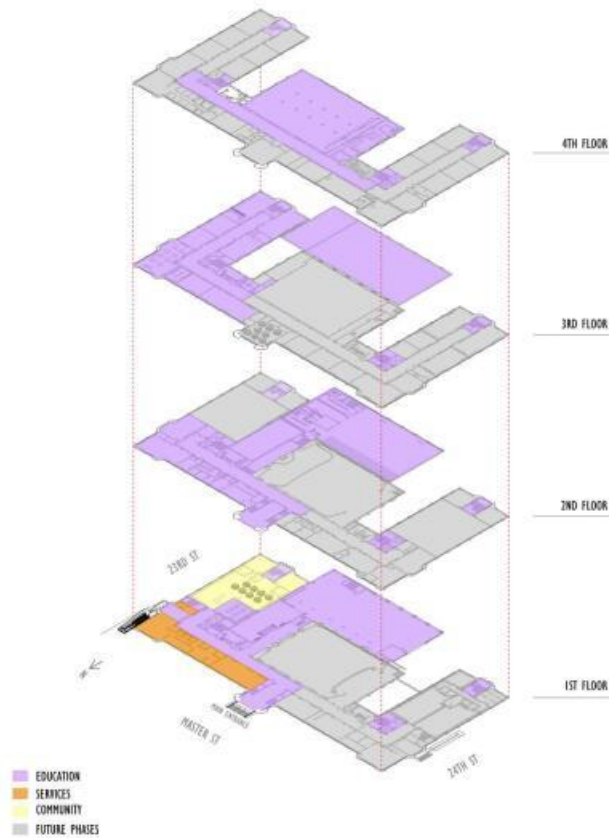
<sup>44</sup> Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. "Memories from Miller. 2005. PDF. <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/school-preservation/files/memoriesfrommiller.pdf>

- Approach the school rehabilitation project in phases that are easily funded;
- Research and apply for community revitalization grants or school-centered organizations that can help contribute to the expenses of rehabilitating the building.

Hopefully, this case study can enlighten other cities and communities to find partners and other funding alternatives of turning disrepair historic public neighborhood schools into successful community assets that benefit the younger generation and long term residents.

## Appendix:

Original Vaux Big Picture plans that author based her floorplan layout on for Vaux Big Picture. (By CICADA INDUSTRY)



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