

**The Dock**  
*locomotion ~ learning ~ life skills*

The Montessori approach encourages students to conduct a process in assessing an issue or problem and to look for solutions that can be self-directed. This approach is also one that Intercultural Montessori Language School's administration takes to heart.

Intercultural's Chicago campus is a 66,900 square foot, multi-level building located at 114 S. Racine Avenue in the West Loop community. The building was constructed in 1914 and its history includes a multitude of businesses, owners and renovations. Intercultural has called this building home for 10 years and has owned the property since 2015. Prior to 2020, other businesses had offices in the building. However, the school's vision is to remain the sole occupant of the building, utilizing the entire space to provide a unique dual-language Montessori education for its students, age 2 through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The building is land locked with no adjacent green areas.

In accordance with COVID-19 guidelines, the present utilization of the building has been adapted to ensure the minimal sharing of common areas for students and the maximum use of classroom space for social distancing. It has also provided the opportunity for administration to re-think the use of existing space. It is the latter that addressed the issue of students having a space for an indoor playground and multi-purpose programming area.

Currently, a large, two-level indoor heated dock is being used as a parking space for the school's minibus. With the creative use of existing ramps, the dock will be transformed into an indoor playground for all students as well as a multi-purpose programming area for the older students. (The minibus will be used daily to transport Elementary students from the Oak Park campus to Chicago and will be parked at Oak Park during the evening.)

**Indoor Playground**

During the 2020-21 school year, Intercultural's board and administration worked together to create a COVID-safe environment for students to experience in-school learning. For outdoor recreation, a part of the parking lot was sectioned off with movable barriers as Skinner Park, located a few blocks away at Skinner West Elementary School, was closed for most of the year. Once the city playground was open, students and teachers walked to the playground as they have for the past ten years.

While a playground experience taking place in Skinner Park has remained constant for Intercultural students over the past 10 years, the West Loop community has undergone major changes. Harpo Studios was demolished, and McDonald's Global Headquarters was built. Google opened its Chicago headquarters. Between 2008 and 2016, more than 4,100 residential units were constructed and thousands more have either been built in the past five years or plans are underway. Skinner West Elementary School continues to be on *Chicago Magazine's Top 20 Neighborhood Schools* and the West Loop is consistently ranked in the top five Chicago communities to raise a family.

Why are the above statistics relevant to Intercultural having its own playground? They are of paramount importance as they indicate a remarkable growth in the West Loop population and in those who use the Skinner Park playground. On any given day, one will find residents, Skinner School students, numerous day care center students...and Intercultural students as young as 2 years old. Teachers continue to express major concerns for student safety due to the number of people that are sharing the same space.

In addition to increased safety concerns, there are other factors which often limit the ability for Intercultural's students to have a playground experience. These include:

- The time it takes for students to walk to the park
- The logistics of getting younger students ready for the journey
- The need for parents of Extended Day students to have flexible pick-up times
- Chicago's ever-changing weather

Multiple studies have documented the importance of physical activity in the development of pre-school and school age children. Other studies have concentrated on the positive impact of playground experiences, including those of Dr. John Ratey, best-selling author and Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Ratey, who studies the connection between the brain and fitness, says physical activity in school taking place in a playground environment:

- Improves attention, decreases stress and anxiety, and prepares students to learn. It also improves motivation—helping kids try things they might not normally be inclined to try.
- Primes the brain cells to change when new information is introduced.
- Promotes the growth of new brain cells so the brain can absorb and retain new information.

Maria Montessori believed that the child's desire in doing anything is to use the maximum effort. Children thrive in an environment where there are optimal challenges enabling one to stretch their skills without being frustrated or bored. Play is one of those challenges and according to Montessori, it is the most valuable way that children learn. Play incorporates creativity, dexterity, physical strength, problem solving, exploration, initiation, concept formation, emotional strength, conflict resolution and social skills.

Transforming the indoor dock into an indoor playground is a practical solution to a growing concern for the safety of Intercultural students that will truly enhance their educational experience.

### **Multi-Purpose Programming Area**

In addition to a playground environment, the dock transformation project provides the opportunity to create social spaces for elementary age students. These spaces include areas where students can gather in small groups for reading, creative writing, independent projects and art.

The space also provides a safe space for middle school students to house their pop-up businesses, as part of the micro-economy curriculum. The store would be located inside, and customers would access the business through the dock door, adjacent to the parking lot.

### **The Design**

A representative from Nu Toys Leisure Products met with Intercultural representatives to discuss a plan that would meet the needs of our students. Based on multiple discussions, Nu Toys created a 2,100 square foot play environment design which includes the following:

- Climbing equipment for 2–5-year-olds
- Climbing and exploration equipment for 5–12-year-olds
- Seating and meeting areas for students to gather in small groups
- Floor surface covering
- Gardening planters, used as barriers in front of dock door, for students to maintain and study

The project budget is \$250,000.