

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 1, 2017

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ST. LOUIS SCHOOL OPENS LEARNING CENTER IN PURSUIT OF LIVING BUILDING CHALLENGE CERTIFICATION

St. Louis, MO - When it comes to practicing what you preach, The College School in suburban St. Louis is leading the way.

Since its founding in 1963, the school has had a mission of engaging and captivating children ages 3 to 14 through hands-on, nature-based experiential learning. Sustainability is a common theme throughout the curriculum. (In fact, the school has had a sustainability coordinator on staff for 10 years.) The school is also a U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School.

In May, the school will unveil its latest sustainability-themed undertaking: the 3,000-square-foot Jan Phillips Learning Center, located at its 28-acre off-site LaBarque Campus near Pacific, MO. Named in honor of former Head of School Jan Phillips, the learning center was built according to Living Building Challenge (LBC) standards, which are considered to represent the highest level of achievement in a green building rating system. Within the learning center are a classroom/community space, a workshop, restrooms and a storage area which doubles as a protective shelter against storms. In addition to the learning center, the project also includes a 1,400-square-foot outdoor classroom/pavilion and a 2,150-square-foot plaza, which doubles as a solar observatory.

The learning center is designed to achieve net-zero energy, water, and waste in pursuit of Living Building status. Currently, there are only 11 LBC-certified buildings worldwide. "Green" features employed at the Jan Phillips Learning Center include rainwater capture and reuse, composting toilets that make use of resources that otherwise would be wasted, daylighting, natural ventilation, renewable energy, salvaged and locally harvested low-toxicity materials, an aqueduct, a stream feature wall, stained glass storytelling panels and a stone chimney which represents the geology of the area.

Head of School Ed Maggart said everyone connected with the project knew that meeting LBC standards would be a challenge. "But I don't think any of us realized just how immensely challenging it actually would be," he said.

The first obstacle was finding a construction company willing to meet the LBC's rigorous standards. St. Louis-based Harlan Company accepted the challenge.

But the entire construction process was difficult from the get go. “For example,” Maggart said, “the way the foundation is designed according to LBC guidelines required much innovative thinking. Harlan performed 14 experimental foundation pours before finding a suitable solution.”

Sourcing construction materials also presented numerous challenges. Just being located in the middle of the country posed issues, since the majority of LBC-approved materials are more readily available on the east and west coasts. In addition, LBC-certified buildings cannot use “Red List” chemicals, which are known to be harmful, such as polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and mercury.

In the end, Maggart said, all construction materials for the learning center were sourced within 300 to 400 miles of the site.

“By pursuing LBC certification,” Maggart said, we hope to inspire others to take on projects focused on sustainability.”

The Jan Phillips Learning Center will serve as the base of operations for the LaBarque Campus and all of the ecological and scientific studies, adventure education, and cultural, historic and arts projects that take place there. “The facility itself also has educational features built in so it promises to be a model of sustainability study for our students,” Maggart said.

Just as important, the learning center is intended to become a place for The College School to connect with the larger community. The learning center will be used to host conferences and workshops on experiential learning for teachers from schools throughout the St. Louis area as well as a site for students of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds from local schools to visit and experience alongside students from The College School.

“The opportunities to develop educational partnerships with other schools, particularly those with limited access to facilities like ours, is tremendous,” Maggart said. “The sky’s the limit. We are excited to share this special place with the entire community.”

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About The College School

The College School engages children, ages 3 to 13, in curriculum that is adventurous, theme-based and experiential. Our newest updates and offerings include a digital recording studio, renovated play spaces and a state-of-the-art learning center on our second, 28-acre property. Visit www.thecollegeschool.org to learn more about The College School journey and to see how our students think, collaborate and have real impacts on their worlds.