



photos by SHARON LAMIEUX/staff photographer

Above, Gill fourth graders Mark Ostach (left), Dana Wantlin, Lee Ehlers and David Sproul offer their opinions to John Dean, an architect for New York state-based Robert Leathers & Associates. At right, Dean sketches student ideas.

Future designers

Community playground project lets students become architects

By Casey Hans
staff writer

NO DREAM was too wild, no idea too far-fetched.

From the excitement of pint-sized kindergartners to suggestions from more mature fifth graders, students of all ages watched their ideas and dreams come alive on paper as they helped to design a new playground for their southwest side school in Farmington Hills.

"Who are the playground experts?" asked John Dean, a rather animated playground architect with a mission.

"Us!" screamed an excited group of second graders.

Mazes "with scary things," tall castles with lookout towers, "swirly slides," tunnels in which to crawl and read, and even a makeshift planetarium are all student ideas which could become part of a new Gill playground in 1992.

Well, how about a "bouncy bridge" between the castles? Or a treehouse? "You want a treehouse? Holy beeebees! Guess what — you're going to get a treehouse!" Dean said, playing to his audience of tiny people who were eager for the project to begin.

In addition to the planning, kids will help build the custom-designed

playground next spring with others from the Gill community. The Gill PTA has donated \$10,000 toward the project, expected to cost between \$35,000 to \$50,000, and a parent committee is raising the balance of the money privately.

BECAUSE A playground is their world, ideas from these little people are most welcome.

"We found the kids are kind of the high octane fuel for a project like this," said Dean, an architect who works with the New York-based firm of Robert S. Leathers & Associates in putting together similar projects across the country. The company has done more than 700 in the last 22 years; Dean has designed and coordinated 200 such projects himself.

"It's always inspiring to talk with the kids," he added. "Obviously, it's their world — as adults we tend to lose perspective on that."

Dean spent a 13-hour day at Gill Tuesday working with students, staff and parents to design their custom playground. In May, hundreds of parents, students, staff and other community volunteers will come together for five days and make the dreams a reality.

It will, in Dean's words, take "hundreds of volunteers and thousands of nails."

The concept for these playground projects, which involve the community from start to finish, began in 1970 when architect Robert Leathers attended a PTA meeting at his daughter's school. There wasn't enough money for a decent playground, so Leathers and the other parents decided to build one themselves. The rest is history.

The concept took Leathers back to his boyhood days in Maine where he and friends built many forts and he developed an interest in architecture.

Gill's playground project comes on the heels of a major renovation and addition at the school. Parents decided in 1988 to begin working toward the playground project because of its sorry condition.

Principal Michael Duff has called the project "one of the most unique community/school efforts I have ever seen."



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Third grader Lauren Hespala is eager to have her opinion about the Gill playground heard. At left is classmate Lindsay Middleleaf.



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Inkwell provides information about primary and secondary education issues and students from the Farmington area. Send information to: Inkwell, The Farmington Observer, 21898 Farmington Road, Farmington, 48336. Please include a daytime phone number. Items will not be taken over the phone.

RIGHTS BIRTHDAY

Students at Eagle Elementary in West Bloomfield plan to celebrate the 200th birthday of the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution with a very special guest — Uncle Sam. On Friday, Dec. 13, two days before the 200th birthday, Uncle Sam will star in a one-man show called "Uncle Sam's Happy Birthday Bill of Rights Show."

Using magic tricks, music, skills and student participation, Uncle Sam will present lessons about symbols of freedom, the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, the 13

original U.S. colonies and more.

"We're looking forward to an exciting show that will help the children discover what it means to be free and that history is fun," said Eagle principal Susan Johnson.

Uncle Sam will be played by Doug Scheer, of Scheer Assembly Productions of Farmington Hills. He is a professional magician and entertainer. His appearance at Eagle is sponsored by the Eagle PTA.

MATH COMPETITION

Twenty-six students from Farmington Public Schools have scored in the top five percent of all students who took part one of the 35th Annual Michigan Math Prize Competition Test on Oct. 16.

They placed among the top 923 students of the 18,953 who took part one of this difficult test at 452 schools across the state. These 26 will participate in part two of the test on Dec. 11.

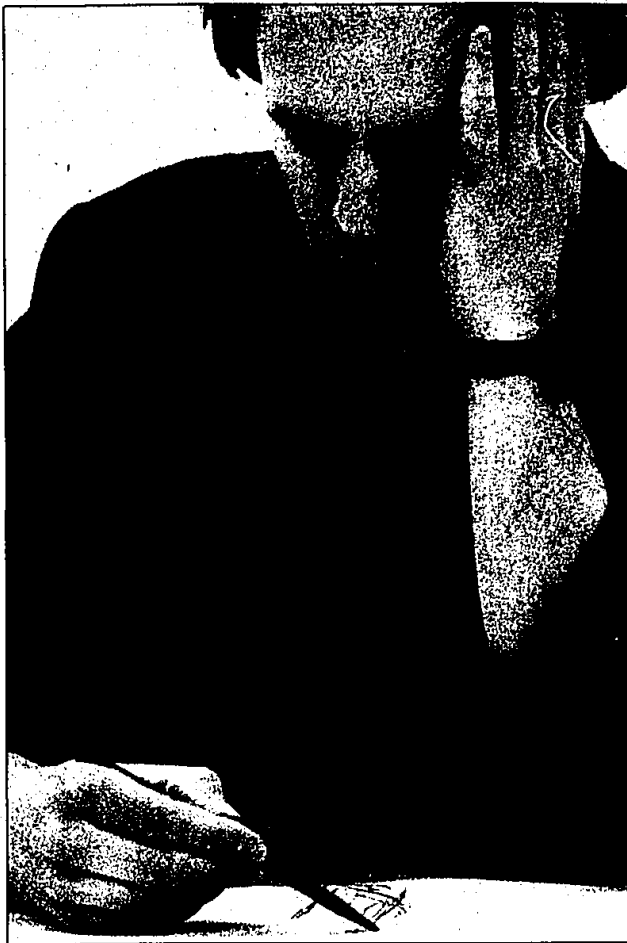
The top 100 performers statewide

will be invited to a banquet at Lawrence Technological University next February, where the top 50 scorers will receive college scholarships ranging in value from \$350 to \$2,100.

Farmington's finalists are: Brian Afferbaugh, Chand Anne, Kristi Bosker, Michael Brodsky, Rob Cavagnoli, Brenda Cho, Alicia Crossland, Avi Drisman, Eric Exlinger, Chrissy Jacobs, Mike Lacosse, John Mitchell, Jeff Monash, Rony Kukhopadhyay, Charlie Ornstein, D.J. Otani, Rajeev Parekh, Ben Pinsky, Pare Scanno, Tara Schubert, David Serlin, Morris Slutsky, Ben Spector, Elliot Sperber, Dan Stein and Naoko Torikat.

HOLIDAY BAZAAR

A Holiday Bazaar has been scheduled for this Saturday, Dec. 7 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Farmington High School, 32000 Shilawasse. The event is sponsored by the Farmington Football Backers, a parent group. There will be a \$1 admission.



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