Creating a playground without barriers
Slide would be open to disabled children during recess at Beaver Meadow
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Diane Ardinger, a kindergarten teacher at Beaver Meadow, holds hands yesterday with students to represent a walking trail that will be built this summer.

On Saturday, Beaver Meadow School's traditional playground - twisty slide, fireman's pole, zip glider - is coming down. It will be replaced by a barrier-free play area designed by the Natural Playgrounds Company, the first of its kind in Concord.

The 400-student elementary school broke ground on the $135,000 project yesterday morning in a ceremony that included a song about playgrounds, a gold-painted shovel and a Native American poem. At the end, all of the students and teachers - and a few parents - joined hands and formed a giant loop around the school's backyard. The loop represented the quarter-mile walking trail that will be built this summer. Much of the rest of the construction is contingent upon fundraising, which is ongoing.

The trail is part of the first phase of the playground project. It will be wide and accessible to everyone, including students who use wheelchairs. Beaver Meadow is one of the city's most accessible schools and is a magnet school for students with disabilities. It's also the city's biggest school.
The first phase will also include the construction of a sand play area and the transformation of a large dirt field into a grass field. The existing blacktop will be painted with a map of the United States, a giant chess board and a sundial. But the feature the students are most excited about is the slide.

It's no ordinary slide. Architects hope to build a climbing hill and, into the side of the hill, a metal slide. That way, all students can use it, regardless of whether they can climb stairs.

The playground, "goes beyond (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements," said Susan Smith Meyer, a landscape architect helping with the design. "It's like the ultimate in barrier-free."

And, if you ask the students, it's desperately needed. They called the circa-1995 playground "boring" and said by third grade, its allure has worn off. "When I first got to school here, I would always, like, love going down the slide," said fifth-grader Ryan Sweat, 10. "By third grade, you're hardly ever on it. I probably get on the playground equipment once a week now. Some weeks, I don't even touch it."

Third-grader Eliza Richards and fourth-grader Laura Braley said they mostly walk around at recess and talk to their friends. Eliza, 8, said she and her friends pretend to ride horses to the store, where they buy supplies for their pretend shelter. They also guard the "rock of life," which can heal people.

"But nobody's gotten hurt - or pretend hurt, so we haven't been able to use it," Eliza said, referring to the rock.

Second-grader Julianna Gullage said she doesn't play on the playground equipment as much as she plays under it. She said she and her friends sometimes find dead bugs in the wood chips to play with.

Parents who have worked on the playground design said they hope it will encourage imaginative play. Many of the playground's features will be natural - boulders, logs, sand - and built to be used in however many ways kids can dream up. The second phase of the project includes an amphitheater with rocks for seats and musical instruments, such as drums, chimes and a xylophone, all around it.

They also hope the design will serve as a national model for accessible playgrounds. "It will show people that it can be done," said Karen Knowles, co-chairwoman of the PTO's playground committee.

Principal Roger Brooks said he hopes the new playground cuts down on the sometimes-mischievous misuse of equipment. "Kids are creative," he said, "and once they get tired of using the playground equipment the way it was intended to be used, they find creative new ways to use it."
Parents began brainstorming ideas for a new playground in 2006. They enlisted the help of Ron King, a Concord-based designer who specializes in natural playgrounds (Natural Playgrounds Company). King worked with the students to build models of their ideal play area and then incorporated their ideas into a design.

The playground committee is now working with an architect to turn the design into a reality. They've raised about $60,000 so far, most of which came from a $50,000 grant from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. That money is enough to complete the first phase of the project, parents said.