

Bradford Students Create Models of Their Ideal Outdoor Play Space

By Warren Johnston
Valley News Staff Writer

The pupils at Bradford, Vt. Elementary are planning how they want to play. Because of recent renovations at the school, the land around the building was scraped clean, and teachers, parents and officials decided to get the children's help with the new landscaping.



Concord, NH Natural Playground Architect Ron King, who specializes in natural playgrounds, met with the third-through sixth-grade students at the school last week for two days to help them build scale models of the outdoor areas.

“The models included caves and shady areas, and they will be used to come up with the final design,” said teacher Jim McCracken, who is coordinating the program.

King, President of The Natural Playgrounds Company, was part of the school's artist-in-residence program. He had the students participate in an interactive slide show and explained the concept of natural playgrounds, which use boulders, mounded earth, hollowed-out spaces, and wooded plots as play areas. The students were divided into groups to develop the models using natural materials. Once the models were constructed, the students explained how the play areas would be used. The ideas and photographs of the models will be given to the committee that is working on the final landscaping plan, McCracken said.

The plans probably will include raised planting beds, and students already have in place a butterfly garden, which allows them to place cocoons on plants and watch

them hatch into butterflies, principal Skip Barrett said.

The new playground also will take advantage of a 400-year-old oak tree that the students like to play under, he said.

King's firm recently conducted a survey of 4,000 kindergarten through sixth-grade children and found that they preferred natural play areas to using equipment, King explained in a recent news release.

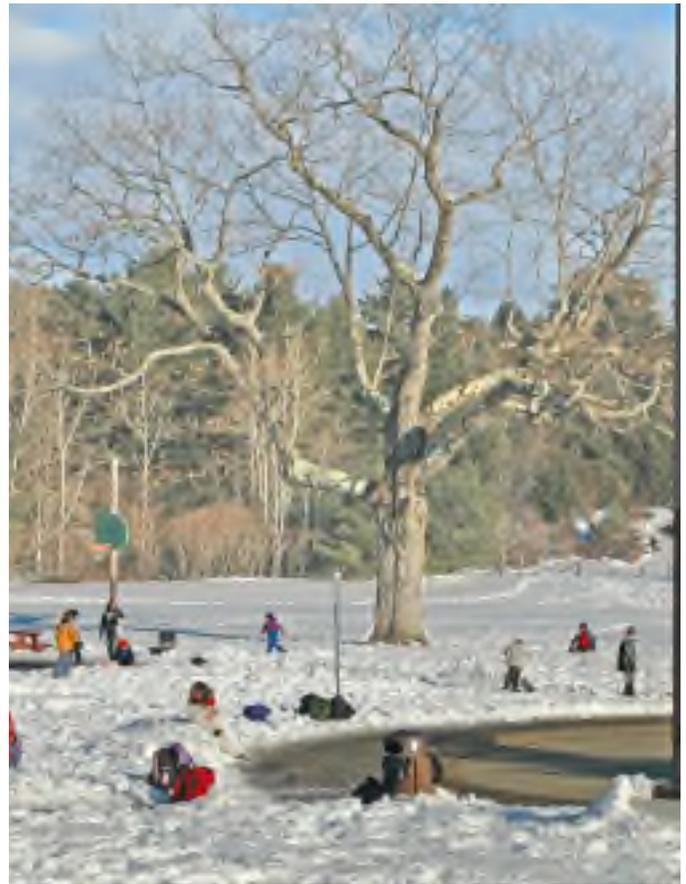
A nature path is a good alternative to swing sets and jungle bars, King said in the release. "Along the path can be hundreds of little things that can be touched, observed, charted, or used," he said.

The natural playground project is part of the school's effort to use "place-based curriculum," which gets the students out into the natural area where they live, Barrett said.

Place-based education immerses students in local heritage, culture, landscapes, opportunities and experiences, uses the surroundings as a foundation for study of language, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum, according to the Web site for Promise of Place.

Promise of Place is part of a program called Sustainable Communities and has its roots in Foxfire curriculum at Rabun Gap School in the rural mountains of Georgia.

The center is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the National Park Service, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park and Shelburne Farms and other education and charitable groups.



Bradford Elementary received a \$15,000 Wellborn Ecology Fund grant. The fund was set up through a bequest from Margarite Wellborn, a Hanover resident who was an avid naturalist. The fund supports experientially oriented ecology education programs that focus on the communities of the Upper Valley.

Also, thanks to a former Bradford student and Eagle Scout, Taylor Parsons, the school already has a nature trail.

The students hope the new landscaping will give them better access to that area, Barrett said. The concept of King's natural playgrounds is not new in the Upper Valley. The Natural Playgrounds Company recently completed the design of the new play area for The Child Care Center, which serves the children of employees at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, NH. They plan to complete their natural playground by August, Director Lori Harris said last week.

Swing sets were removed and will be replaced by a more natural playing area with raised mounds, boulders and woods, she said, adding that there also will be raised gardens for the children to plant and watch vegetables and flowers grow.

The natural playground will cost from \$30,000 to \$40,000 and will use a lot of volunteer help, Harris said.

As part of the overall playground at the Bradford school, a portion will still have conventional playground equipment, which was recently purchased, Barrett said.

