

"Natural Playground" Underway In Webster Groves

Walter Ambrose Family Center outdoor area to be transformed into unique play area

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for the Webster Kirkwood Times

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Webster Groves will be home to Missouri's first "Natural Playground" now under construction at the Walter Ambrose Family Center (WAFC), 222 W. Cedar Ave., formerly known as Bristol Primary.

The playground was designed and is being installed by The Natural Playgrounds Company (NPC) from New Hampshire. The new play space is approximately 38,000-square-feet and is expected to be completed later this spring.

Funding for the new playground, which is expected to cost a total of \$279,000, came from the The Walter Ambrose Family Center Parent Teacher Organization, several grants, and a development fund established in 2002 by the Early Childhood Program.

Informational sessions were held about the new play concept and parent groups enthusiastically embraced the idea, according to Webster Groves School District Community Relations Director Cathy Vespereny.

Merlene Gilb, assistant director of Early Years Education, spoke to the decision to switch from a traditional playground to a natural one.

"We wanted to offer the children here more authentic play and an opportunity to connect with nature," Glib said. "We wanted to offer them chances to use their imaginations. It's an open-ended space for children to play the way they want to play."

Natural Playgrounds Company President Ron King said a natural playground is an outdoor play and learning area designed to take advantage of the natural landscape. A major criteria in developing the WAFC design was to break up the school's sloping



*The new playground at the Walter Ambrose Family Center in Webster Groves will be dramatically different than traditional play areas. It will feature natural elements such as a boulder amphitheater, an artist workshop area and a climbing wall in place of more traditional playground equipment. **photo by Diana Linsley** (click for larger version)*

hillside to allow different elements to be incorporated, to make it less intimidating to the younger children, and to take care of major drainage issues that had been plaguing the school for years.

The WAFB playground will offer several play areas including a boulder amphitheater with stage, a large, free-form sand play area, an embedded hill slide, a climbing wall, a fort, gardens, rock climbing areas, a sensory garden and many other play and learning elements. There will also be an outdoor atelier, which is an artist workshop area.

School officials were given a 30-page questionnaire to determine the wants and needs of the school and its students. NPC then created a unique playground based on that input.

King has interviewed almost 6,000 children and several adult groups about their likes and dislikes of outdoor play. Topping the list of favorite outdoor activities are building forts in the snow, playing in creeks, hiding in bushes, making mud pies and catching butterflies. Children continually say that playground equipment is boring.

"I say to the adults that I don't get it," King said. "If you liked these things when you were a kid and your kids today like those very same things, why do you want to give them manufactured playground equipment?"

King claims the play behavior of children on a natural playground is dramatically different. Schools that have installed natural play areas see bullying incidents drop, aggressiveness lowered, and children who are constantly moving around and helping each other more often.

In some areas the grass will grow tall and flower. Bushes will provide prime fort-building spaces, and gardens allow children to see how fruit or vegetables grow.

The play areas are constantly changing with each season, providing new discoveries and options for children, according to King. The playground also doubles as an ever-transforming outdoor classroom and learning lab to utilize as a teaching tool.

"It's a habitat. It's a sustainable environment," King said. "That's what the earth is all about, and that's what we're trying to teach our kids."

King said the life of traditional playground equipment is about 15 to 20 years, so that replacing equipment at great cost is an on-going “forever expense.” A natural playground costs significantly less and keeps value far beyond the expiration date of equipment.

Local materials are used as much as possible in the playground construction, and all vegetation will be purchased at local nurseries as well.

"Once we get the grass, plants and trees in there, it's going to be a beautiful place for kids to play and families to come visit," King said.

The new natural playground will be part of this year's Webster Groves High School Parents Club annual garden tour on June 2. For more information about the tour visit www.wghsparentsclub.org.