

Natural Playground coming to Grant elementary school

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With each generation comes a new rendition of the "when-I-was-a-kid" tale.

Play often is at the center of these recollections, by grown-ups who wear like a badge of honor the scarred knees (scraped on pavement under their playground's metal slides) and who boast of the hours spent (unsupervised) in pastures and at river's edge.

Play nowadays tends to be limited to prefabricated playgrounds that have become increasingly safe and litigation-proof, limiting -- some say -- the imagination-inspiring and natural elements that kids need.

But a crop of students at Wildwood Elementary in Grant is soon to get its own story-worthy playground.

Designed by the Natural Playgrounds Company, the play area will feature hills, trees, logs, sand, bridges, natural climbing elements, a slide built into the landscape, an amphitheater with boulders for seats, and movable pieces for building anything the kids can dream up.

So what makes a Natural Playground so much better than a traditional one?



"Kids are really learning while they're playing. They're acting out all the things they need to know about other people -- with sharing, with taking turns -- and it's not only the gross motor activities, but thinking and interacting with their world," said Jeanne Zlonis, a member of the Mahtomedi Area Green Initiative, which is raising funds for the play area's 50-some trees. "The Natural Playground gives them a place that they own, that they can observe the changes of the seasons. Their senses are involved in these experiences, the wind blowing, the smell. ... Balancing on a log on the ground is more challenging than standing on a preformed plastic structure."

The natural play area will cost an estimated \$200,000, more than \$142,000 of which has come from donations. Construction by the Natural Playgrounds Company, which also designed the outdoor play and learning area, is expected to begin this month.

Talk of a natural play area began before the school was even constructed, Zlonis said.

Wildwood Elementary, part of the Mahtomedi school district, sits just east of Mahtomedi High School and Middle School. It opened last fall to house grades K-2 and early-childhood education, replacing an aging school in Mahtomedi. The \$18 million modern and tech-savvy building was built with an eye to its natural surroundings -- the Gateway State Trail, woods, and wetlands.

So some say the construction of a Natural Playground is the perfect fit.



"If you've seen the setting out here, it's unbelievable," said Laura Brandt, a second-grade teacher who's been at Wildwood for 27 years. "It really melds nicely together."

Brandt was part of the committee that worked with the Natural Playgrounds Company to plan the natural play area.

"I looked at our kids' day and it's highly structured. And kids are structured outside of school, with sports and music. So having a Natural Playground, they finally have some choices about what they're going to do," Brandt said. "Your traditional playground has equipment and that's what they play on. Period. The Natural Playground has structures, like a big climbing area in the middle, and areas where they can do free play. They'll have logs to do whatever, just to use their imagination."



Sharon Hanifl-Lee, whose family foundation contributed \$50,000 to the playground project, said the idea fits nicely with the foundation's mission statement and was something the family was very interested in.

On a personal level, Hanifl-Lee said she has fond memories of playing as a kid -- even the slivers and broken bones.



They were important risks that had an impact on her development and her confidence as an adult, she said.

"You know, when we were young, we would roll down hills and pick up sticks and just run around. It was nice to have that," she said. "When kids don't have that feeling, they have increased anxiety and obesity and they don't do as well on tests. ... Plus, when they play outdoors, they learn to love the outdoors."

The play area is envisioned as more than just a recess opportunity. Over time, and as nature allows, the space will be used for outdoor learning. There are plans to connect the space to the adjoining wooded area by trails; to plant gardens that will attract migrating birds and butterflies; and to plant a variety of indigenous trees.

"There have been some studies done -- and I can't quote them with the source -- that show people that get out in nature, that get their feet on the ground, that are able to be in a treed, natural setting have lower blood pressure, their tension is reduced, there is calm, they have peace," Brandt said. "So if you think about a school with 600 students (like Wildwood), if we could do that for our students, using the space we've got, wouldn't that be a great thing?"

All photos: Examples of a Natural Playground. (Courtesy of Natural Playgrounds Co.)

