

# Building Safe Playgrounds And Neighborhoods



Program  
2005



Columbus City Council  
Kevin L. Boyce

## Columbus Building Safe Playgrounds & Neighborhoods Program

### *Playgrounds Serve Kids and Entire Communities*

Community playgrounds serve as much more than just aesthetic greenspace. They offer students recreational and educational opportunities while improving the quality of life for the entire community. As a public health asset, they promote healthy lifestyles and work to prevent the growing epidemic of childhood obesity. Open spaces and the overgrown toys we call equipment invite families to play, learn, and grow right in their own neighborhood.



Columbus has nearly two hundred public playgrounds. Sixty seven can be found at elementary schools within the Columbus Public Schools system, while 130 lie within Columbus Recreation & Parks sites.

**Existing deficient and unsafe play areas.**



### ***Unsafe Conditions Cause Health Hazards, and Reduce Use Value and Contribute to Childhood Obesity***

Unfortunately, far too many Columbus-area playgrounds are not the safe havens they should be for children and families. Outdated and inappropriate equipment, inadequate surfacing and other issues make some playgrounds a safety hazard.

Adverse impacts result in the short and long term. More immediate issues arise from accidents. For example, Columbus Children's Hospital treats more than 600 children annually for playground related injuries. Three-fourths of the playground injuries result from falls. The severity of the injuries depends, in part, on the height of the playground equipment and the ability of the surface underneath to cushion and slow the fall.

While many Columbus school and park playgrounds have been replaced and improved over the last fifteen years, some sites still rely on equipment dating to the original development of the facility. Some are built over or too close to asphalt and concrete. Even on sites where the wood fibers offer a softer landing, the combination of weather and heavy use quickly erode the thickness of the surface.

Just as significant, outdated or unsafe conditions deter families from using these sites. This means, in turn, that children's recreation options are limited, a problem with real health consequences. Research conducted by the Osteopathic Heritage Foundation indicates that children's physical activity levels have dropped in recent years. Children spend an average of five and a half hours a day in passive activities, like watching television, playing video games or using computers.

Studies also have shown that 48% of girls and 26% of boys do not exercise vigorously on a regular basis<sup>1</sup>.



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<sup>1</sup> CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1999

The problem intensifies in lower-income neighborhoods where families cannot easily access appropriate exercise facilities and nutrient rich low-calorie foods<sup>2</sup>.

Not surprisingly, childhood obesity has emerged as a critical public health issue in the Columbus.

The Mayo Clinic reports that the rate of obesity for preschoolers in the United States has more than doubled over the past 30 years. Rates more than tripled for children ages 6 to 11.

Obese children more frequently suffer from health problems such as diabetes and heart disease, often carrying these conditions into adulthood. In fact, if current trends are not curtailed, obesity may soon top smoking as the nation's leading preventable cause of death.

### ***Building Safer Playgrounds and Neighborhoods***

These concerns drove the creation of a unique public and private partnership known as Building Safe Playgrounds and Neighborhoods. This initiative is dedicated to ensuring that every playground in Columbus offers families a safe environment that maximizes the social and educational benefits of outdoor play.

#### Program partners include:

Columbus City Council, led by Finance and Administration Committee Chair Kevin Boyce

Members of Mayor Coleman's administration

Columbus Public Schools

Columbus Recreation & Parks

Columbus Children's Hospital

KidsOhio.org

In 2005, phase one of the initiative began by identifying four parks/schools with the most need for redesign and development: Broadleigh, Hilltonia, Innis and Northtowne. Broadleigh Elementary School, located on the east side of Columbus and Northtowne Elementary School, to the northeast, were the first two playgrounds renovated.

City of Columbus and Columbus Public Schools staff met with school principals, teachers, Parent Teachers Associations and parents. They

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<sup>2</sup> Chamberlin LA, Sherman SN, Jane A Powers SW, Whitacker RC, The Challenge of Treating and Preventing Obesity in Low Income, Pre-School Children



discussed overall changes to school grounds and site location for walks, site furnishings and the playground.

Each group also met with representatives from the play equipment manufacturers to review the play equipment and select colors for the playground. Students became involved in this process by creating posters and drawings illustrating their perfect playground.

Construction of these two innovative playgrounds is currently in progress. Student and their families anticipate playing on the new playground during the holidays.

### ***Grounded by Past Partnerships***



This initiative builds upon a proven model. Past partnerships between Civic Associations, Parent–Teacher Associations, and the City of Columbus have led to major facility improvements, from tree plantings and perennial gardens to gazebos, sport courts and field as well as

**Neighborhood volunteers pitch in to build a new playground at Saunders Park.**

playgrounds. Bringing the community together strengthens neighborhood pride and often inspires community members to take an active role in protecting and maintaining play areas.



### ***Team Approach to Project Management***

The Building Safe Playgrounds and Neighborhoods collaborative team directs site selection and fundraising. The team arranges neighborhood meetings with neighbors, school staff, civic associations, nearby church and community groups, interested businesses and elected officials. In addition, it handles construction management of the design and building process, as well as the establishment of maintenance endowments to ensure that the new assets are kept safe for years to come.

Throughout this process community members work closely with Columbus Public Schools and the City of Columbus. All work will be undertaken with the full consent and involvement of the local school and surrounding neighbors. Their advice and thoughts help guide design and build strategies, and their “sweat equity” will be utilized in potential future construction phases and long-term maintenance.

### ***Ensuring Accessibility***

Each neighborhood has unique accessibility concerns to address regarding walkways to schools and parks. Every site must offer safe and convenient pedestrian access along primary roadways and local streets. These items are identified and discussed through this process.

Thus, our group analyzes a variety of “connection” issues, including:

- Speed Limits
- Type of Traffic and volume to provide traffic calming
- Parking
- Sidewalks and crossings
- Traffic restrictions during school hours and flashers
- School zone signage
- Required school pavement markings
- Traffic signals
- Overhead street lighting
- Road resurfacing

### ***Setting criteria to target schools of greatest need and use funds efficiently***

School and park sites will continue to analyze and select sites utilizing the following criteria:

- Selecting schools that are not slated for near term improvements as part of the Columbus Public Schools building improvement plan.
- Equitably distributing improvements and investments, so that all areas of the city benefit.
- Awarding higher priority to areas where schools and parks are contiguous, enhancing the recreational and exercise needs of the entire neighborhood.
- Targeting playgrounds where no current equipments exists or the equipment is at least 10 years or older; where the site requires extensive work to establish appropriate use zones; and where the site lacks adequate safety surfacing.
- Prioritizing schools and communities that already have identified a need to upgrade and improve and are willing to join the planning process.

### ***Technical Standards***

The Building Safe Playgrounds and Neighborhoods program encompasses standards and recommendations from federal and state agencies, such as the Consumer Product Safety Commission; National Playground Safety Institute; American Society of Testing and Materials (ASTM); Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); and the Ohio Schools Facilities Commission (OSFC).

We expect that by synthesizing these guidelines and integrating them with best management practices for construction, our project team will continue to develop a more comprehensive set of standards for public properties and shared facilities. These can be utilized by supplier and contactors and may prove invaluable to volunteer organizations that often donate time and resources for playground upgrades.

### ***Projecting and staying on budget***

The cost for equipment and playground resurfacing at each site is estimated at approximately \$150,000.

These investments will yield great returns for each neighborhood. An average elementary school of 300 students uses play equipment 3,000 times a week and over 111,000 times during recess alone in a school year. If just \$1 dollar were spent for every recess period, the playground would pay for itself in only one school year.

### ***Average Cost for Building a Playground:***

|           |                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| \$30,000  | Component (entire linked structure) piece of equipment for 2-5 grades and installation                                             |
| \$10,000  | Free standing / athletic play pieces and installation                                                                              |
| \$15,000  | Component or free standing equipment for pre-k up to 2 grade and installation                                                      |
| \$50,000  | Safety surfacing and installation                                                                                                  |
| \$ 5,000  | Demolition and site preparation                                                                                                    |
| \$15,000  | Improvements to outdoor paved play area                                                                                            |
| \$40,000  | Maintenance, repair and reinstallation of safety surfacing over a 15-year life expectancy-Columbus Public Schools, funding source. |
| \$150,000 | Total                                                                                                                              |

We intend to seek a combination of public and private funds for each project, making each site a true shared facility as well as a “living” example of a positive public/private partnership.

Building Safe Playgrounds and Neighborhoods is an interactive planning process, using a combination of internal strategic planning and community outreach to create an ongoing dialogue. Neighbors and students play an instrumental role in the partnership as well.



## *Planning Process*



The process will follow these basic steps:

**Columbus children playing on a hazard-free playground with cushioned surface.**

- Contact will be made with neighborhood civic associations or members of the City of Columbus' 30 planning areas.
- A public meeting will be held, allowing for a presentation of the overall concept and a request for what components might be included in the "ideal" park and/or playground.
- A compiled "wish list" will be reviewed and items will be prioritized as a committee, leading to a site Master Plan showing several potential phases of development.
- The plan will be shared at a second public meeting. Once these ideas are put into drawing form, most residents can better visualize what the park and play improvements will look like. Momentum should build as the community begins to see the project as more than just a dream but a reality.