

# Rocky Mountain News

## From barren to beautiful

### Schools in different sections of Denver realize that nice playgrounds promote learning

Lisa Ryckman, News Staff Writer

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Cheltenham Elementary School floats on an urban island ringed by chain-link fences and busy streets. The sun bakes the school's piles of brick, pools of gravel and wide stretches of asphalt, relieved by welcome swaths of grass on every side but one.

The playground.

At recess, the 700 kids at Cheltenham run, jump and fall on a bleak stretch of blacktop and pea gravel, skinning knees, bumping heads, scraping elbows and sometimes breaking bones.

Hit the ground at Cheltenham, and it's going to hurt. It's been that way at many Denver Public Schools for 50 years: dirt-patch playgrounds and fields, where the only living things are the kids.

The "scorched earth" approach to play space, landscape architect Lois Brink calls it.

But it takes green to make green, and in the budget-conscious world of DPS, playgrounds compete with basics such as paying the electric bill. Grass doesn't come cheap.

"If I have to have a trade-off between a playground and adequate heat and a non-leaking roof, those are going to take priority," says Mike Langley, DPS executive director of facility management.

Sod costs about \$1.50 a square foot, and DPS grade schools have an average of 43,000 to cover. That's about \$65,000 right off the bat, plus the maintenance costs of sprinklers and water. But Langley would gladly spend the money — if the district had it.

"If you talk to educators, they would tell you there is a link between your play areas and your overall environment and the quality of learning and the ability to learn," he says. "We want to try to provide that."

The minute Cheltenham Principal Kay Frunzi arrived a year ago, she knew she had to put some grass between her school and West Colfax Avenue. So she thought about who might have the money.

She wondered about the new \$360-million Denver Broncos stadium being built just a few blocks away. Then she sat down to write a letter to Broncos owner Pat Bowlen. Maybe the Broncos would buy them some sod.

"That's how naive I am," Frunzi says, realizing it would take more than a letter, which she never mailed.

In the school newspaper, fifth-grader Trenell Sanders makes a compelling case for grass.

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"We need grass because kids are getting hurt and they're missing out on their learning," he writes. "Cheltenham's field looks very tacky ... when people look at it, they probably wouldn't want their kid to go to a school looking that way. That's why I think people don't have pride in Cheltenham."

Last spring, Frunzi tried to tap into a playground renovation program born at Bromwell Elementary, another Denver public school.

Enter Bromwell's playground and feel the magic: big trees and whimsical banners, rocks to clamber over and swings and slides and climbing structures painted green, purple and orange.

It wasn't always that way; a few years ago, Bromwell's playground was as dull-normal as any other. But the school became the incubator for an idea from one of its parents, Lois Brink, an associate professor of landscape design at the University of Colorado-Denver.

Challenged to develop a hands-on project for her graduate students, Brink thought of the often barren world of elementary school playgrounds. Empty canvasses of land just waiting for a creative hand.

"We wanted to raise the standard of what a playground should be, to make it a place to learn and a community gathering place, to make it a focal point of the community," Brink says.

Bromwell was the perfect proving ground, Brink figured, because its parents could raise the

bucks. So they formed a landscape committee made up of people who wanted to go beyond just planting petunias out front. Together, they developed a four-phase master plan for the school.

Up went a fanciful gateway to welcome the whole community into the playground, an outdoor solar system plaza and a grassland garden. Still to come: an outdoor stage and a weather-monitoring station. It's a place that seems to inspire peaceful and often purposeful play.

"It's more than just putting in a couple of swings," Brink says. "This has much bigger ramifications in terms of children and their ability to learn and the self-esteem of a community."

DPS' Langley looked at Bromwell and was sold. A year ago, the school board approved a partnership with UCD, and 12 schools went through the master plan process with one of Brink's students. Most of the elementaries are schools such as Cheltenham, located in lower-income neighborhoods.

"Our goal is to build these so we can demonstrate that you can improve learning, you can improve test scores by the environment kids are in, and that includes their playground," Brink says.

Last year, 89 percent of Bromwell's third-graders scored "proficient" or better in reading on the Colorado Student Assessment Program, the state

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standards test, ranking them No. 2 in the district. Cheltenham, with 29 percent at those levels, was 61st.

A great playground isn't going to bridge that gap. But people at both schools think it might help.

Garden Place Elementary in the Globeville neighborhood has finished its new \$300,000 playground, due for dedication in a week. A teacher there told Brink that the kids have become more attentive and better behaved in class because they can't risk being kept inside at recess. Playgrounds have power.

"You can't do that with a level dirt field," Brink says.

Money for all this poses a profound problem. Implementing a full master plan costs about \$500,000, and the district can afford to pay about \$30,000. That acts as seed money that can attract more money, Langley says, but it's always a scramble to find funds. Brink says she hopes they can get big construction companies to adopt schools and donate time and work.

DPS is dedicated to upgrading every playground that needs it, which is pretty much all 84 of them. So they take it a step at a time.

"Having a master plan gives us something to build to," Langley says. "Then we can go out and get the grants."

Cheltenham was one of 15 schools that applied for a master plan this year. Neighboring Colfax

Elementary, which sits even closer to Colfax Avenue, was chosen. Cheltenham was one of four schools that weren't.

Next year, Brink thinks.

Last week, a few blocks from Cheltenham at Mile High Stadium, crews were replacing 40,000 square feet of sod — about the size of a typical DPS elementary school field — for the second time this season. Frunzi would have loved a piece of that grass. A green field is better than nothing — and much better than the weed-filled moonscape Cheltenham has now.

But Brink and her students want more than sod for schools such as Cheltenham. They envision learning landscapes that become landmarks, special spots where community pride can flourish and endure.

"You can't just stick in eight swings and make it green and say that's enough," she says. "It has to be a transformation. They've lived with so little for so long."

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