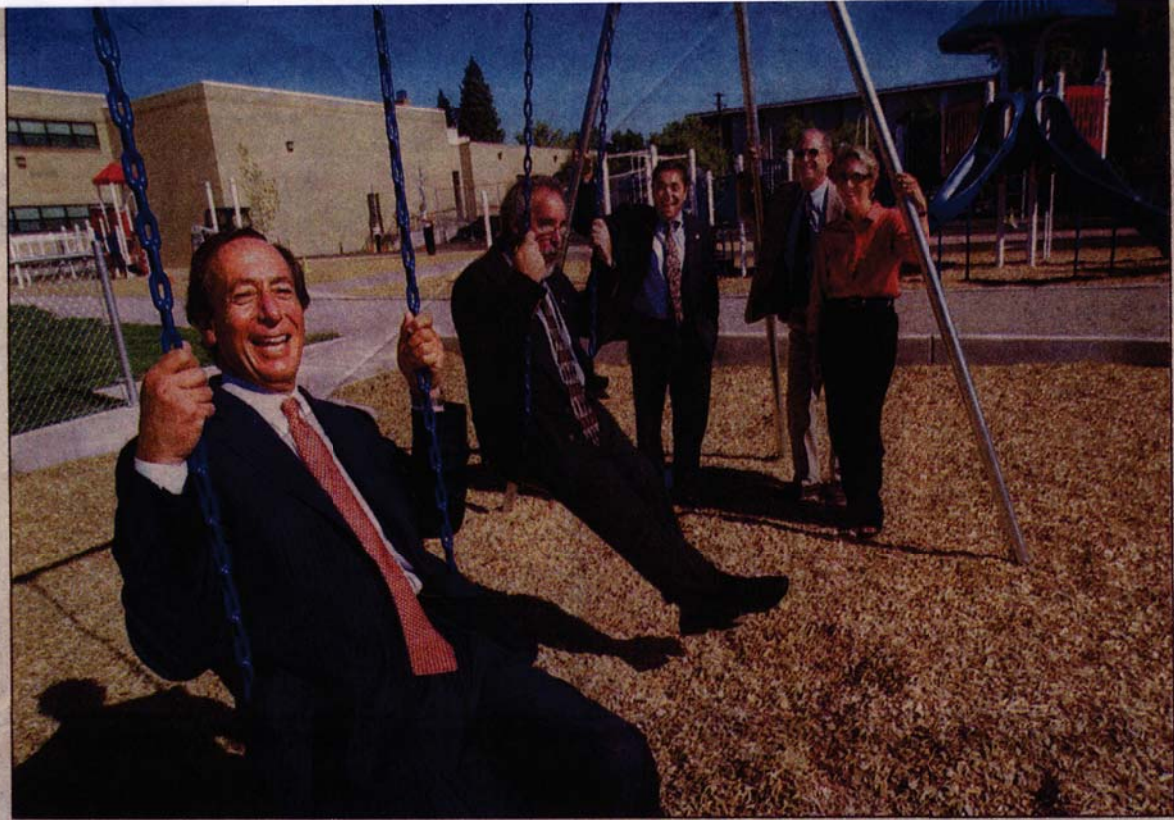


DENVER AND THE WEST

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The Denver Post / Glenn Asakawa

Steve Farber, left, and Ron Bernstein, also on swing, first met as students at Colfax Elementary. Decades later, the pair helped raise money for new playground equipment for Colfax and other schools in low-income neighborhoods.

Playground project swings high

By Cindy Brovsky
Denver Post Staff Writer

Fifty years ago, Ron Bernstein and Steve Farber played baseball on a dirt lot near a couple of swing sets at the Colfax Elementary School playground.

Generations of students sat on the same rusted swings and often received scraped knees from the broken asphalt and gravel.

Today, the once-neglected lot in west Denver has been transformed with brightly colored playground equipment and lush turf

Schoolyards get new equipment, turf

through a partnership between Denver Public Schools, the city, the state, private foundations and alumni.

"Until six months ago, this playground was exactly the same as when I was a kid," recalled Farber, a Denver attorney. "The improvement is unbelievable and well-deserved for these children."

Farber and Bernstein, director of the Mayor's Office of Economic

Development, joined the ambitious project to replace outdated playgrounds at elementary schools in 23 low-income neighborhoods.

Mayor Wellington Webb first learned of the poor condition of the Colfax playground through a letter-writing campaign by students. When he visited the school, Webb was impressed with the \$800 in coins raised by the stu-

dents to start the work on the playground.

The Colfax playground is part of the \$9.8 million project city-wide. Last year, supporters who call themselves the "Learning Landscape Alliance," quietly replaced nine playgrounds.

The goal is to complete seven more playgrounds this year, and an additional seven in 2003. Each playground costs \$400,000 to \$500,000, including equipment, ir-

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Project gives schoolkids new places to play

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rigation systems and turf.

The city donates \$700,000 to \$900,000 to the project each year through federal grants. The state's share comes from Great Outdoors Colorado lottery proceeds. DPS is responsible for maintenance of the playgrounds.

"We have so much more fun this year because we don't just have the boring old equipment," said Marris Aguilar, 8, a fourth-grader at Colfax. "We never had grass before and a lot of kids used to get hurt when they fell."

Marrisa and her classmates painted tiles that will decorate shade covers near the playground.

Physical education teacher Tom Barela said the new playground helps the kids' overall attitude about school.

"Just think if you went to work where the air conditioner was broken and the furniture was old," he said. "It would be harder to get your job done. The same thing is true of kids. They now have the proper equipment to enjoy themselves and take pride in."

Principal Mary Romero agreed. "All that you have to do is look at their smiling faces to know what this means to them," she said.

The playgrounds are designed by graduate students at the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado at Denver. Neighbors and students at each site help plant the turf and trees. Some of the playgrounds include education centers with butterfly gardens.

"This is not just about replacing a playground, but making the schools a community gathering place for the neighborhoods," said Lois Brink, an associate professor overseeing the designs.

The Gates Family Foundation began spearheading the fundraising after hearing about a playground replacement effort at Garden Place Elementary School in

Globeville. Principal Alvina Crouse, who has since retired, donated \$10,000 of her own money to get the project started.

"We think it's unprecedented for a city and school district to work with foundations and the business community to have multi-use playgrounds for the community," said Tom Kaesemeyer, executive director of the Gates Foundation.

The foundation gives \$50,000 per playground. Also pledging \$50,000 are the Denver Broncos, Colorado Rockies and Kroenke Sports, owners of the Denver Nuggets and Colorado Avalanche. Other large gifts from school alumni, businesses and other foundations range from \$2,500 to \$25,000.

The alliance still needs \$130,000 to complete the seven playgrounds this year. Supporters also hope the downturn in the economy won't jeopardize the remaining seven playgrounds scheduled for next year.

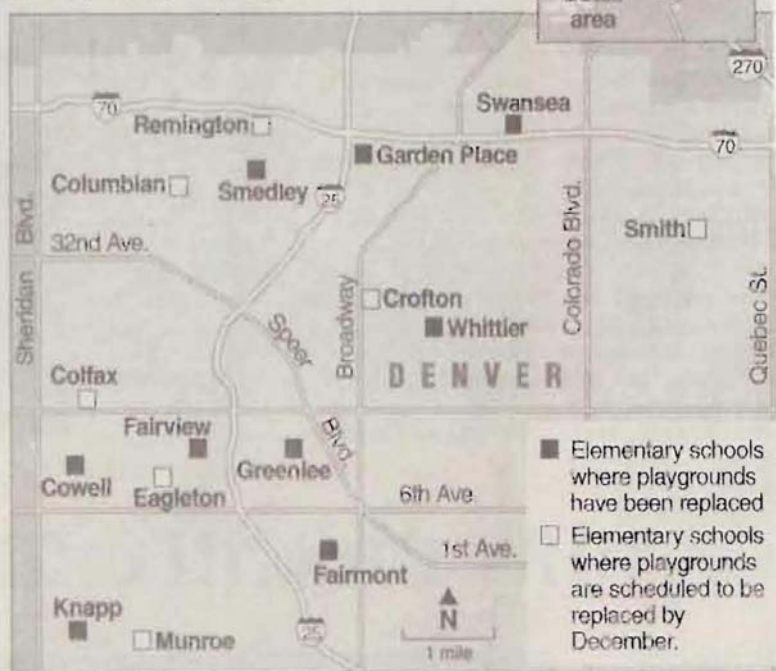
"These kids now have a place to play that has grass, which many don't have in their own back yards," said James Mejia, a DPS board member and manager of Denver Parks and Recreation. "We have several projects under our belt and we're hoping it will be hard for people to say no to continued funding when they see the positives of this project."

Swansea Elementary School assistant principal Rodney Fernandez understands the impact of the program.

"The old playground was pretty depressing," Fernandez said. "This new playground has become a centerpiece for our community. Because we built it together, there is a sense of pride among the parents and students that this is their playground."

Swing shift

Denver Public Schools, the city, the state, private foundations and alumni have teamed to replace outdated playgrounds at elementary schools in low-income neighborhoods.



The Denver Post / Thomas McKay