



MARIA LAVILA/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

First-graders at Herbert Munroe Elementary in Denver play Tuesday with the gravel covering the school's field. Principal Jody Cohn is afraid the school might not get a new grass field this year if the Denver Water

Board restricts watering and installing sod. Physical education instructor Eric Berghorn said the grass field "would give the children a safer place to play." The gravel area is used for running and field events.

School backers want break from drought rules

Elementaries were set to receive lush new expanses of sod

By Holly Yettick
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

In the asphalt quilt that is Denver's Westwood neighborhood, the playing field at Munroe Elementary is just another blacktop patch.

That was supposed to change this fall. A public and private partnership called the Learning Landscape Alliance helped fund fresh

equipment, an amphitheater and — best of all — a community playing field of fresh, soft grass.

But now it looks like there might be interference from the same mother nature who is an absentee parent in a community short of trees and long on concrete walks and commercial strips.

A severe drought has forced the Denver Water Board to consider banning outdoor watering and preventing new sod from being laid. Board members will meet this morning to vote on these and other water restrictions.

Alliance supporters have been lobbying the board to grant exemptions at Munroe and three other in-

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ner city elementaries — Crofton, Egleton and Remington — where Learning Landscapes are in progress or in the works.

Draft language allows the continued watering of athletic fields, but it's unknown whether elementary

school playing fields would fall under that umbrella.

The changes also could prevent the school district from landscaping around new schools and classroom additions. Though not part of Learning Landscape, some of these spots also serve Denver's poorest neighborhoods.

Water board members have tough decisions ahead, said Tom Kaesemeyer, executive director of the Gates Foundation, one of the Learning Landscapes' many benefactors.

He hopes those decisions favor Learning Landscapes, which aims

Sod: Neighborhood kids play in street

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to use public and private money to add 11 new play areas by 2003 to the 12 that are already completed.

"We believe this whole Learning Landscape Project has been conceived to provide for the poorest communities so there's a little bit of green, there's some shade and there's some appropriate equipment," he said.

"The question (board members) have to answer is how to achieve their goals of saving water and set smart priorities. In the end, you hope there is some broader equity across the metro area."

Board members reached Tuesday

said they haven't made up their minds about Learning Landscapes.

Member Denise Maes said she had yet to review information on how much water would be saved if the playground projects were halted.

"Whatever decisions the board makes tomorrow will hurt somebody's business," said Liz Gardener, conservation manager for Denver Water. "Nothing about a drought is fair."

Munroe Principal Jody Cohn says it also is unfair that students at her school are forced to wade through pea gravel to play soccer. Each evening as she leaves school, she

sees children playing in the street. Last year a little boy was killed near the school when a car hit his bike.

"It's very bleak," Cohn said.

Norma Saenz, a school secretary who lives in the neighborhood, says the nearest green space, Garfield Park, is so far away she sometimes drives her 4-year-old son there instead of walking.

"As a parent," she says, "I would like to know my child is here, playing close to home."

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