

Designing and Building Naturally Better Play Spaces
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1. Susan Wirth, The National Arbor Day Foundation

Why build better play spaces?

- 53% of young kids when asked used more negative than positive phrases to describe nature.
- Continuous over time --- reinforcement, not one-time efforts.
- Children benefit from being outdoors -- improved behaviour, involve the families
- Need positive experiences with nature over time as a youngster.
- Our future advocates.

What is a well-designed outdoor space --- what works well for young children to learn and experience nature in multiple ways? Provide a sense of place to the children and ownership by the local community.

- Natural design --- 10 field tested principles (outlined in Learning with Nature Idea Book in association with Dimensions: Educational Research Foundation)
- Trained staff.
- Family and community involvement - ex Nature Explore Clubs.

Good website: www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature

2. Jeanne McCarty, RealSchoolGardens Fort Worth, Texas

- Focus on lower income neighbourhood schools.
- Without engendering passion --- there will be little carry over, as children get older.
- A generation or so ago, most families involved with agriculture and gardening. Not now, so need to make concerted effort.
- Integrate school, life, family --- total package, one's life system.

Schools and Gardens (www.realschoolgardens.org)

- Gardens provide daily interaction with nature and can go deeper because of continual contact and are integrated into the curriculum and climate of the schools.
- Inspire young children and engage teachers. Builds the community.
- Sense of wonder, appreciation and awe about how things grow and the cycle of life.
- Garden is one component of a well-designed outdoor space in the schoolyard, not 'stand alone'.
- Offer \$30000 to invest in garden, plus \$45000 for professional development and networking with other RealSchoolGardens.
- The training for teachers important so there is complete ownership in the school. If ownership the teachers use them and figure out ways to adopt the curriculum to the garden space.
- Have done comparative studies between 'garden schools' and 'non-garden schools' --- have seen an 11-point difference in science scores.

- Professional development of the teachers provides an essential step so there is confidence in their ability to use the garden. RealSchoolGarden staff provide 'modeling' to show the teachers how gardens might be used and maintained.
- Gardens foster a cooperative spirit with families and community groups. Also engage volunteers to assist. Business partners can also evolve to assist with long-term maintenance, especially over the summer when schools aren't active. An enjoyable 'hub' for the neighbourhood.
- Provide a network of the RG Schools. Host events, train teachers, share ideas --- 3 a year. Keeps the concept sustainable over a broad region.
- Important that school gardens:
 - Inviting space.
 - Learning space with endless opportunities.
 - Encourage exploration.
 - Easy to maintain and encourage renewability.
 - Remember, these are not master gardens, but teaching gardens.
 - Community ownership and senior school staff involvement essential.
 - Integration with curriculum

3. Q/A's

- Garden in every school, wonderful vision --- how do this? Support of senior administrators important and must also sort out liability issues. Some states have passed child development block grants, that assist with funding...needs more attention/focus.
- What are the small classroom costs at Arbor Day? ---- design, education, consultation, etc ---- ~ \$30000
- Are there concerns about kids playing in dirt, or drinking the water --- are their liabilities? Is 'real dirt' OK, or what are the regulations? Public housing less regulatory than school environments may be an alternate venue if required.

4. Face-Slappers!!!

Moral is --- don't be stupid. Fight back the legislators, lawyers and standard setters. Risk assessment must be sensible. Better to put up with the occasional skinned knee or broken bone than obesity or diabetes. Long-term assessment must be built in better. Learning 'your limits' is an essential element of a child's learning.

"A skinned knee or a twisted ankle in a challenging and exciting play environment is not only acceptable, it is a positive necessity to educate our children and to prepare them for a complex, dangerous world." "...as safe as necessary not as safe as possible..." (Tom Mularkey, Chief Executive of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, United Kingdom.)

Discovery learning and discovery play is the way to go - for children and families.

Schools should have procurement policies to buy locally for cafeterias and food provided in the various institutions.

Although the initial cost of these play areas may be higher but look longer term --- and the cost isn't nearly as high as most people think.

Mustn't forget early childhood educators --- can't start too early.

Link this conversation to the climate change concern. Create the visibility nationally and regionally - especially the point that future citizens will need to make serious decisions about the environment as a result of climate change; so must have the next generation knowledgeable about the environment and web of life to make those decisions.

As discussed this morning we need the research to provide evidence that these efforts do work and do actually show the results for children that we say.

Ideas and Recommendations

1. Make all the presentations from these workshops available to the attendees. Create 'a library of expertise from the conference in *PDF* form...post on the C&NN website.
2. C&NN develop a risk assessment statement that reflects the above concerns that we can all use and get behind. Critically important.
3. Develop policy through professional organizations and work with standards boards to incorporate natural elements in urban parks, playgrounds, and schoolyards. Also influence the sources of money so that the money is provided on the condition that these elements are built in or the funds wouldn't be provided.
4. Develop a 'country-wide' map of these school yards/gardens so that we are aware of where they are. Then make presentations to the key nation-wide organizations to ensure these key networks are champions and understand the need for natural schoolyards and school gardens ---- NAAEE, etc.
5. Need to develop a 'common template' for school boards to facilitate these changes to improve our outdoor school places and where children play.
6. If we are to be healthier human beings --- link the nature-child initiative with health care costs. Link this conversation to the health agenda and the concern for human health and healthy ecosystems. Connecting to the health agenda will also assist with funding as it draws in different foundations than the usual environment/conservation foundations.