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focus



A fully accessible playground will give all kids a place to play.

By AMANDA SOUTHALL

Leaning close to his work, Rob Parlow, 4, carefully added a few final touches of paint to his ceramic tile. One last dab of white, a few more strokes of red, and the painting was complete. The ceramic tiles children and parents painted during a family night in April at John B. Cary Elementary are the initial pieces to a much larger project. Eventually, they will be placed in a mosaic wall at a new, fully accessible playground.

"The goal of [the playground project] is to create a state-of-the-art playground so all of our students can use the equipment without barriers," said Brenda Phillips, principal of Cary Elementary. "It's not just a new playground, it's a place for children to play who never had that opportunity before."

At first glance, the current playground at Cary doesn't seem to need many improvements. Children dart from the swings to the monkey bars and play chase around shiny yellow slides.

For children like Ruben Swanson, though, the playground isn't as inviting.

Ruben uses a stroller for mobility, so mulched playgrounds without access ramps pose a challenge for him and children like him.

"A playground should be something every child can enjoy," says Ania Swanson, Ruben's mother.

Motivated to Act

Seeing her son's difficulty, Swanson decided it was time that Cary's playground got an update. Shortly after Ruben began school in 2006, Swanson spearheaded a movement to build a new play-ground. With the help of the school's administration and a committee established by the PTA, the idea for a fully accessible playground began to grow into a reality.

The proposed playground will have slides, a rock climbing wall, monkey bars and a sliding pole. There will also be guardrails, swings with extra support, activity stations designed to improve fine motor and cognitive skills, ramps and a surface to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers.

"It will be accessible and it will be fun," says Swanson. "The surface and ramps are also great for parents with strollers. It seems that everything you do to make the playground more accessible helps everyone."

Generally speaking, fully accessible public play-grounds are a rarity. There is one in

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"The moment I heard about this project I was excited about it, but I knew we would really have to get busy. In my time here at Cary we have never taken on a project this huge that would have such a positive impact on the school and the community," says Phillips. "But how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." Building an Inclusive World A little more than 10 percent of the 325 students at Cary have a learning disability or physical handicap as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act. Students with and without special needs learn together in inclusion classes at Cary, and Phillips says the playground will be another piece of the puzzle.

"Schools are microcosms of the world so it's important for [children] to understand each other and build relationships," she says. "When the children are all playing together there's a chance for that relationship to grow naturally outside of the structured classroom setting."

"This project is beneficial for kids who don't have disabilities as well," says Parlow. "It's critical that they grow up in an environment that embraces differences."

A Neighborhood Asset

J. B. Cary is located in a Richmond neighborhood and that, coupled with its proximity to Maymont and Byrd Parks, makes its playground a popular place for children to play outside of school hours.

"In its current state our playground is already heavily used after school and on weekends," Phillips says. "I foresee this being a viable part of the community as a whole."

"It's hard to estimate the impact this will have. The playground will potentially give thousands of kids a chance to play for years to come," Swanson says. "It's going to be an awesome playground."

To learn more about the J.B. Cary Elementary fully accessible playground project, visit www.jbcaryplayground.com.

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With Civil Rights and Access For All

Playgrounds are only part of a larger inaccessibility problem at Richmond Public Schools. The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, before most Richmond school students were even born, but all but five of Richmond's 59 schools are still not in compliance.

"There has been precious little done at these schools, at this point it becomes a question of priorities and values," says School Board member Carol A.O. Wolf, a leading advocate for the cause of ADA compliance in the schools.

"This is a civil rights issue and it just hasn't been a priority to the school system in the past." For Richmond Public Schools, the task of meeting ADA compliance is a large one. In June, Richmond's ADA coordinator Aisha Shamburger released a list 97 projects at 33 schools. Shamburger estimates the improvements—which include things such as ramps, signs, elevators, and accessible toilets, parking and water fountains—will cost about \$2 million.

"This is really a major undertaking for Richmond Public Schools and unprecedented for the school system to take on 97 different projects," says school system spokeswoman Felicia Cosby.

The school system settled a lawsuit in 2006, which set a five-year deadline for bringing every city school into compliance.

"This problem persisted because nobody stepped up," says Vicki Beatty, one of the plain-tiffs who brought the suit against Richmond Public Schools. "My son is non-verbal so I have to speak for him when his civil rights are being violated."

Beatty's son Davis uses a walker and a wheelchair for mobility so he cannot attend Fox Elementary, just a few blocks from his home, with his brother. Instead, Davis attends John B. Cary Elementary.

"I'm glad to finally see projects are starting and people are getting behind this," Beatty says. The conditions don't only affect students, With Civil Rights and Access For All but also parents and potential employees with disabilities.

"We have children who have a right to go to their schools and adults who have a right to watch their children in a spelling bee and attend a spelling bee. When you deny access you deny people of jobs and deny people of their rights," says Wolf.

The School Board unanimously voted to settle the lawsuit in January 2006, a settlement that established a five-year deadline for bringing every school in the city up to ADA compliance. In the two and a half years since the settlement, progress has come in the form of hiring Shamburger, assessing needs and getting funding for the projects.

Richmond's old buildings add a unique challenge. The newest building is 10 years old and the oldest dates back to 1911.

"We have some of the oldest buildings in Virginia, most are over 60 years old; ADA wasn't even thought of back then," Shamburger says. "Modifying anything that old is a major undertaking."

The list of 97 improvements is only two-thirds of projects scheduled to be completed in the first year after the settlement. Completing the entire list will cost at least \$25 million, Shamburger says.

"Financing these improvements is the major challenge we're facing. As we go forward we're still looking at options," says Cosby.

The options include obtaining money from City Council and grants and selling unused property owned by the school system.

"The goal is to use what we have to obtain this money without raising taxes," says Wolf. "There has been money in the past, it's just gone to other things, school buses, fixing a roof. There are always needs, this just has to be a priority for changes to be made."

Though the five-year deadline nearly half over, Beatty is optimistic: "I think they've got a good chance to get it all done in time." - *Amanda Southall*