

Tillman Playground Design Principles & Philosophy

DRAFT Philosophy & Potential Guiding Principles - February 2026

Design Team Initial Response Form: <https://forms.gle/n3cpzjTppDnSfZ8MA>

Tillman sought student and family input to inform our initial playground design process. Our student survey yielded 225 responses, while 75 people completed our family survey. Links to raw data are included, with a brief AI summary provided. [Survey Survey Data](#) - [Family Survey Data](#)

What Students Told Us About Recess & Play Students told us that recess is about playing with friends, moving their bodies, and feeling happy and energized. Climbing, swinging, running, and making up games were among the most popular ways students like to play. Many students shared that they want: • More places to climb, run, and play games • More nature on the playground, including trees, grass, logs, and rocks • Shady spots for comfort and breaks • Spaces to be active and places to sit or reset when needed Students also emphasized the importance of friendship. When recess feels hard, the most common response was that being with a friend helps the most — reminding us that recess supports social and emotional growth as much as physical activity. Overall, student feedback strongly supports a playground that is: • Active and joyful • Social and inclusive • Full of variety and choice • Balanced between open space, climbing, and nature-based play	What Families Told Us They Value Most Families shared hopes for a playground that feels engaging for multiple ages, supports social connection, and offers experiences children don't always find in traditional playground designs. Here's what we heard clearly: • Families value active, joyful play, especially climbing, swinging, spinning, and wide-open movement. • There is strong support for a balanced playground - about a 50/50 mix of traditional equipment and open-ended, nature-based spaces. • Nearly all families shared that nature elements (hills, logs, boulders, trees) are important. • Many families are comfortable with adventurous play and creative nooks, recognizing the benefits of challenge and imagination. • The most common words used to describe an ideal playground were fun, active, inclusive, safe, and full of variety.
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We believe Tillman's playground design proposals should support the social, physical, and emotional needs of children, reflecting our school's philosophy about learning, research about productive play, and extensive student/family input.

Our Core Design Philosophy

Tillman's playground should be an active playspace while also serving as a landscape for learning. Designs should prioritize how children actually play: with friends, through movement, with imagination, and through opportunities for productive challenge. Such as space must be

- Active and joyful
- Social and inclusive
- Supportive of both high-energy movement and physical/social/emotional regulation
- Integrated with nature
- Balanced between structure and open-ended, imaginative play

Our initial draft list of guiding principles includes the following, with additional details provided below.

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| 1. Build Spaces for Friendship and Connection | 6. Provide Shade and Comfort |
| 2. Balance Structure and Imagination | 7. Encourage Adventure While Supporting Safety |
| 3. Prioritize Movement and Physical Challenge | 8. Support All Ages and All Ways to Play |
| 4. Design for Inclusion and Belonging | 9. Plan for Long-Term Use and All Weather |
| 5. Make Nature Part of Play | 10. Keep Student Voice at the Center |

Draft of Guiding Principles - Tillman Playground Design

We believe recess is a valuable part of the student experience, as play is essential to the positive growth and development of K-5 students. Outdoor spaces should feel like extensions of our classrooms, with embedded opportunities for academic, physical, and social-emotional learning.

1 Build Spaces for Friendship and Connection

Design the playground as a place for social interactions and community, in addition to movement.

- Prioritize social play and shared experiences
- Include intentional social nodes (benches, logs, nooks, small-group seating)
- Ensure students can stay connected even when they need a break or reset

Design Requirement

The playground must intentionally support social interaction and connection.

Potential Specifications

- Include multiple social nodes distributed across the playground:
 - Benches, seat walls, logs, boulders, or clustered seating
 - Spaces that accommodate 2–6 students comfortably
- Social spaces must be:
 - Adjacent to active play zones (not isolated)
 - Accessible without leaving the playground area
- Avoid designs that force students to leave recess entirely in order to sit or regroup

Design Question to Address

Where can students reconnect with peers without disengaging from play?

2 Balance Structure and Imagination

Honor the clear request for a 50/50 balance.

- Blend traditional playground equipment with open-ended, flexible spaces
- Avoid over-prescription of how spaces must be used
- Design for imagination, flexible use, and creativity

Design Requirement

Overall layout should reflect approximately a 50/50 balance between:

- Traditional playground equipment
- Open-ended, flexible, and landscape-based play

Potential Specifications

- Structured equipment (slides, climbers, swings) should not dominate the footprint
- Include flexible gathering spaces that can occasionally support outdoor learning, class meetings, or small group instruction.
- Open-ended spaces may include:

	○ Hills, paths, loose or natural elements ○ Flexible fields or undefined play zones ● Avoid over-programming every area with a single intended use Design Question to Address <i>How does this space invite imagination rather than prescribe behavior?</i>
3	Prioritize Movement and Physical Challenge Joyful movement is the primary work of recess. ● Emphasize climbing, hanging, swinging, spinning, and running ● Provide vertical play and opportunities to get “high up” ● Ensure multiple entry points so all students can access challenge at their level Design Requirement The playground must support high-energy, strength-building movement. Potential Specifications ● Prioritize: ○ Climbing and hanging elements (upper-body engagement) ○ Swinging and spinning equipment ○ Running and racing space ● Include vertical play opportunities: ○ Elevated structures ○ Tiered climbing ○ Opportunities to “get high up” ● Provide multiple challenge levels (lower and higher entry points) Design Question to Address <i>How does this design support confidence-building through physical challenge?</i>
4	Design for Inclusion and Belonging Every child should see themselves in the play space. ● Offer varied challenges, heights, speeds, and social groupings Avoid single-use features that serve only one type of player ● Ensure accessibility without segregation Design Requirement Inclusion must be embedded throughout the playground, not confined to a single area. Potential Specifications ● Provide: ○ Multiple access points to play features ○ Varied challenge levels ○ Opportunities for group and solo play ○ Ground-level play experiences distributed across zones ○ Sensory-friendly play elements ○ Wheelchair circulation throughout site (not just entry) ○ Multi-sensory experiences (tactile, vestibular, proprioceptive) ● Avoid: ○ Single-use features serving narrow age or ability bands ○ Segregated “accessible” zones Design Questions to Address

	• <i>Can every student find a place where they belong, and are there places kids will feel excluded?</i> • <i>How does the playground support students with mobility, sensory, and neurodiverse needs in integrated ways?</i>
5	Make Nature Part of Play Integrate nature to support creativity, regulation, and exploration. • Use trees, logs, boulders, grass, and varied terrain as play features • Blend natural elements throughout zones rather than isolating them • Preserve and enhance existing natural features students value Design Requirement Nature-based elements must function as play features, not landscaping only. Potential Specifications • Incorporate natural elements such as: ◦ Trees, logs, boulders, grass, varied terrain • Natural elements should: ◦ Be distributed throughout the playground ◦ Support climbing, sitting, gathering, or imaginative play • Avoid isolating nature into a single “quiet” or perimeter zone Design Question to Address <i>How can students actively play with nature in this design?</i>
6	Provide Shade and Comfort Students can't play fully if their bodies are uncomfortable. • Provide ample shade across multiple zones • Include seating and rest areas near (not far from) active play • Use surfaces that support safety, accessibility, and confidence Design Requirement Shade and comfort must be intentionally designed, not optional. Potential Specifications • Provide shade in multiple zones, including: ◦ Active play areas ◦ Social seating areas • Shade may include: ◦ Trees ◦ Shade sails ◦ Built structures • Seating should be near activity, not separated from it • Surfaces should support: ◦ Safety ◦ Accessibility ◦ Confidence for varied ages and abilities Design Question to Address <i>Can students remain engaged even on hot or high-sensory days?</i>
7	Encourage Adventure While Supporting Safety Embrace age-appropriate risk and challenge. • Design adventurous spaces that spark curiosity and confidence

	• Accept that not all areas must prioritize maximum sightlines • Pair adventure with positive behaviors, conflict reduction, and thoughtful supervision Design Requirement Design should allow for appropriate risk and complexity while planning for sightlines, supervision, and minimizing conflicts. Potential Specifications • Include: ◦ Varied terrain ◦ Creative nooks or semi-hidden spaces ◦ Non-linear circulation • Sightlines should be intentional, considered in ways that do not sacrifice joyful engagement • Avoid designs that flatten experience solely for visibility • Consider zones that reduce chasing conflicts, ball-play conflicts, congestion near entries/exits Design Questions to Address • Where does this playground encourage curiosity and exploration? • Where are natural adult supervision positions? • Where could conflicts occur and how does design mitigate them? • How does design support smooth entry/exit during recess transitions?
8	Support All Ages and All Ways to Play Recess spaces should support graduated play and regulation needs for K-1, 2nd/3rd, and 4th/5th simultaneously • Include high-energy zones and calmer spaces • Provide spaces that allow students to choose how they engage moment-to-moment • Support feelings students named most: happy, connected, strong, and calm • Avoid rigid age segregation within spaces • Provide graduated challenge progression • Ensure circulation paths prevent congestion during recess rotations Design Requirement The playground must support both high-energy play and regulation/reset for 80-100 K-5 students at a time. Potential Specifications • Include: ◦ Adequate capacity for high-energy zones (running, climbing, swinging) ◦ Adequate capacity for calmer areas (shade, seating, quieter play) • Zones should: ◦ Flow into one another ◦ Avoid rigid separation • Students should be able to self-select how they engage moment-to-moment • Students should not spend much time waiting in lines or bottlenecks Design Questions to Address • <i>How does the design support emotional regulation without removing students from recess?</i> • <i>How does the design support simultaneous use by multiple grade levels?</i> • <i>How does circulation prevent bottlenecks and waiting lines?</i> • <i>Where do younger students feel safe while older students remain challenged?</i>
9	Plan for Long-Term Use and All Weather Our playground should meet the short and long-term needs of the school and community. • Consider durability and usability for after-school and community use.

	● Include the following information: ○ Expected lifespan of equipment ○ Annual maintenance needs ○ Replacement cycles ○ Surface maintenance expectations ○ Drainage strategy ○ Warranty details ○ Climate durability Design Requirement Playground must support use in: ● High heat ● Cold temperatures and/or snow ● Shoulder seasons ● Wet conditions Designs should allow for thoughtful phasing or future expansion if needed. Potential Specifications Vendors should address: ● Shade coverage percentages ● Drainage strategy ● Winter usability of surfaces and hills ● Heat-reflective materials Design Question to Address ● How will Missouri’s weather impact the playground and students’ joyful access to play? ● What is the anticipated lifecycle of equipment, including maintenance needs?.
10	Keep Student Voice at the Center Use student feedback as an ongoing filter, including protection of what is already working well. ● Preserve and enhance student-loved features (hill, spinning elements, soccer field) ● Build new experiences that feel connected, not disconnected, from the current playground ● When making tradeoffs, ask: Does this support connection, movement, or choice? ● Keep student priorities visible throughout the design process ● Treat this playground as a reflection of how Tillman listens to kids Design Requirement Proposals should explicitly reference how student input shaped design decisions. Potential Specifications ● Preserve or enhance: ○ The hill ○ Soccer/open field space ○ Spinning equipment (or functional equivalent) ● New elements should feel connected to existing favorites ● Avoid displacing high-value features without replacement ● Vendors should: ○ Identify where student priorities (friendship, climbing, shade, nature) appear in the design ○ Explain how tradeoffs were considered through a student lens ● Include narrative justification, not just renderings Design Question to Address <i>How does this design reflect how children actually play?</i> <i>How will this design feel both familiar and exciting to current students?</i>