

Playground Design Manifesto

November 2024

Built in 1995, the current BLS playground was a community effort to create an exceptional play area for school. For over twenty-five years, it has been an essential part of the beginning and lower school experience, a place where students learn to practice and implement many of the core values of the school. Recognizing that the structure has reached replacement age and is requiring significant, and increasing, annual maintenance, the school intends to replace the playground prior to the start of the 2025–2026 school year.

We first looked internally for inspiration from our students and faculty who have already begun contributing thoughtful and mission aligned ideas. Building a new playground offers the opportunity to take inspiration from the best local and national playgrounds and utilize a new generation of structures and design concepts. The Playground Committee recommends that the following guiding principles be considered in the design of a new playground. This document will be used as our touchpoint for decision-making throughout the design process:

Design Aesthetics

- Spark joy with a uniquely Catlin Gabel destination playground that enhances the magic of the campus and captures the imagination of children.
- As good stewards of School Campus funds today and into the future, we will strive to balance value and total project cost and ongoing maintenance costs.
- The design of the playground should be consistent with the aesthetics of the campus, specifically with its location adjacent to the Fir Grove.
- Design to the natural setting, leveraging the hills, landscape, and storm water as opportunities for play while minimizing construction costs.
- Beautiful landscape elements integrated into the play and campus to activate the area for learning and play
- Primarily wood and natural play elements, while taking into consideration durability, long-term maintenance costs and mixture of play equipment materials.

Design Functionality

- Centered in Catlin values of a progressive education that allows for exploration, safe risk taking, collective play, and helps students build a sense of competence.
- A neighborhood-like space that fosters social connection amongst families, students, educators, and staff.
- Design the playground to support similar programmatic needs as the current playground.

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- Prioritize equipment to support sensory needs, regulation, competency-building along with open-ended and imaginative play in the following categories:
 - Climbing elements such as bars, rings, and scalable structures
 - Tree/spider nets
 - Spinning elements Swings, including accessible swings and basket/tire swings
 - Interactive, tactile natural elements such that support open-ended play
 - Settings that foster imaginative play
 - “Nesting” areas around the playground
 - Slides of all types

Faculty Feedback

- Improve visibility across the playground for supervision, while maintaining a sense of “nesting” areas without being able to hide.
- Provide play elements with a better distinction between safe and unsafe climbing areas.
- Keep a covered area because the playground is used year-round, especially during after school programs.
- Provide areas that allow for unscripted/spontaneous group play. Currently, damming storm runoff in the Fir Grove during heavy rain generates great excitement.
- Spread out the structures, swings to make room for visibility and play; maximize landscaping
- Provide better lighting for after school use.
- Storage for equipment used daily at recess.

Accessibility

- Provide accessible areas proportionate to the accessibility of the campus.
- Consult with OT’s and other relevant professionals on elements that will provide the most accessible use and support self regulation needs.
- Design to integrate necessary site improvements to enhance accessible pathways and better lighting from the parking lot to the lower school field.

Site Improvements

Additionally, requests for improved accessibility to the Lower School from the main parking lot and better visibility in the fir grove area during before and after-school programs will be addressed as part of this project. The existing asphalt path between the playground and the fir grove will be replaced with an improved, widened path, and lighting installed along the path and incorporated into the new playground design.