Schools for the future: designing school grounds

‘As a society, we recognise that our young people are being offered ever fewer opportunities for safe, challenging and collaborative play. Lack of these opportunities can lead to health issues, apathy, social and behavioural issues. School grounds can help raise achievement and self-esteem, improve behaviour and health, and help children and young people develop a wide range of skills.’

(Department for Education and Skills 2006: 7)

Introduction

In December 2006 the government announced a cumulative spending programme of £36 billion over the next four years for educational investment, with £8.3 billion earmarked for new or refurbished schools, including school grounds. To underpin the process, and support the design of school grounds, the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) has published Schools for the future: designing school grounds (2006). This briefing paper summarises the main themes of this guide and highlights the importance it places on children and young people’s play.

The aim of the guide is to provide information, guidance and ideas to inspire the best possible designs for school grounds. It is for everybody who is involved in developing school grounds: head-teachers, governing bodies, architects, dioceses and sponsors.

The guide covers all school sectors, including early years, primary, secondary and special educational needs, and considers the development of existing spaces as well as new build and remodelled schools. Using specific examples from recent school grounds development projects, it highlights ideas for consideration when designing and building school playground spaces. Although it is not a technical guide, the reference section offers signposts to other bodies of knowledge that can help schools with the practicalities of design, construction and funding. It provides a variety of good, practical examples, illustrated with photographs.

The guide acknowledges the value of play to children and young people’s development and learning, and shows how well-designed school grounds can support their play. It provides advice for designing the grounds for ‘experiential learning and learning through play’ [DFES 2006: 62].

Consultation

Consultation with and participation of pupils, teachers and other school staff as well as the local community is a strong theme throughout the guide. Actively involving the pupils can improve their self-confidence and develop subject-specific and wider skills. The guide includes examples of...
children and young people's drawings, images and models, and explains how these were incorporated into the formal design of new school grounds.

**Location**
The guide also contains a section on developing existing school grounds, stating that the sites should be made more accessible for the local community. Road and access requirements can take up a lot of the site, reducing available play, sports and learning space, and this should be kept in mind during the planning of the site. Solutions suggested include a rigorous green travel plan in the local area, and designing bus drop areas that can be closed off to vehicles during the school day and used as extra play space during this time.

**Flexible environments**
The guide advocates a varied landscape in school grounds. The space needs to be well defined, but boundaries don’t need to be conventional – they could act as balancing beams, temporary screens and movable seating. It also highlights ways of using planting to enhance the landscape of the school grounds, and shows how using the natural environment, and getting pupils involved in planting and gardening, enhances curriculum opportunities.

The grounds can be used as an alternative teaching space by creating outdoor classrooms, places for sitting and writing, and can also be used to inspire lessons. This includes ensuring that teaching outside is written into schemes of work, that school grounds feature in development plans, and that provision for outdoor play is written into play and behaviour policies.

‘…Experiences outside the classroom can affect the levels of concentration and well-being inside’ (DFES 2006: 7). Therefore school grounds should:

‘reflect local distinctiveness...use child led ideas, graphics and colours...create comfortable, safe, welcoming, inspiring spaces...be creative in the location and the type of boundaries and space dividers’ (DFES 2006: 7).

There are examples throughout the guide of successful school grounds design that illustrate the processes of looking closely at designing for play.

**Case study: Leesland Infant School, Gosport**
This case study describes the processes this school went through when working with a landscape architect to change their site. The architect worked in partnership with the school to plan the different zones on the site, including a parents’ waiting area and an attractive school frontage. However, the majority of the zones were focused around enabling play.

The zones:
- Quiet imaginative play area: a sheltered space to provide a more appropriate place for quiet and imaginative play.
- Semi-active and imaginative play: an area for specific playtime activities.
- PE and active play: an area of open tarmac primarily for PE activities and active play.
- Side area: a secure space to be used as an outdoor area by the adjacent classrooms for sand and water play.
- The garden: to be used for early years provision, as an outdoor classroom and for imaginative and quiet play.

**Communities**
There is a section in the guide on how important it is for the community to be able to use the school grounds and the development opportunities that this can provide. ‘Children and young people need the opportunity and facilities to enjoy recreational activities and informal learning within their communities’ (DFES 2006: 78). The extended schools approach widens the role that schools can play in providing access to wider services and activities to meet the needs of the pupils, their families and the wider community, and also to form partnerships with other agencies, such as community sports and arts organisations.

The ‘Who can help’ section of the guide advises schools on where to go for advice, and on the type of support that is available from organisations such as Learning Through Landscapes (LTL) www.ltl.org.uk, and volunteer groups such as the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) www.btcv.org.uk and Groundwork
www.groundwork.org.uk. It also contains advice on fundraising and a section on funding available from the government, the Big Lottery Fund and grant-making trusts.

**Focus on play**

‘Play is an important part of pupils’ learning and development experience at school. It’s the way young children learn in particular; but it’s crucial for all age groups. Through play, children learn about themselves, others and the world around them. They learn through experimenting, taking risks, undertaking challenges and finding out where their limits lie. And they need to be given opportunities to stretch themselves within a safe environment – such as safe grounds. An enriched play environment can be achieved by providing a variety of opportunities’ (DFES 2006: 62).

The guide highlights how early years research has shown that very young children need movement and activity to help them make the neural connections that allow the brain to learn. ‘Managed risk and challenge are vital to young children’s development. The space should allow children to safely challenge themselves, to grow and experiment’ (DFES 2006: 90).

It states that physical activity and active play should be encouraged and that schools have an important role in helping to increase levels of physical activity among children and young people through the informal and formal curriculum. Schools should provide a variety of active play opportunities and define the space for active play, using ‘active features’ such as traversing walls, playground markings, fixed play equipment, temporary play equipment, ball walls, balancing beams, fitness trails, logs and stepping stones (DFES 2006: 71).

One of the ‘educational objectives’ in school grounds design should be the ‘layout of space and facilities for all forms of play’. Other objectives include: providing outdoor teaching spaces, stimulating creativity, contributing to children’s health and well-being, creating places where nature may thrive and being located at the heart of the community (DFES 2006: 13).

To achieve these objectives, the following points should be considered when designing for play:

- Play equipment needs to be suitable for the age of the child or young person using it, robust enough to withstand constant use and it shouldn’t restrict the children and young people’s imaginations.
- Play equipment that is versatile and can be adapted by the user is the most useful.
- Small mobile pieces of play equipment will need to be stored when they are not in use.
- All schools must take into account concerns for pupils’ safety, but this ‘shouldn’t prevent pupils’ adventurous and creative play. A thorough risk assessment needs to be carried out to ensure that play is challenging without being unnecessarily dangerous.’
- Playground markings and murals can support play, but while standard elements can be brought in, pupils should have the opportunity to design their own.

Design guidance is provided throughout the guide, which includes a section stating the general features that designers might want to include. In particular, it outlines the need to create varied school grounds that offer flexibility for a number of potential uses, including:

- quiet space for sitting and talking with friends
- space away from others but where pupils can still be supervised
- large open space for running and active play
- enclosed secret space for hiding
- spaces with potential for imaginative play and den building
- gathering places and seating places
- sheltered spaces
- opportunities for community use.

The guide also outlines the ways in which well-designed school grounds can reduce opportunities for conflict among pupils: “‘Place making’ is one of the best ways to promote positive behaviour… It involves creating places that promote a sense of ownership, respect and responsibility, places where the activity is appropriate to the location, reducing the risk of aggression, boredom, conflict and damage’ (DFES 2006: 72).
Finally, the guide suggests that schools should consider bringing in a playworker or play consultant to provide a specialist perspective on informal or extra-curricular use of the grounds, and that this is particularly important for extended schools. ‘A play consultant may offer play training for staff or work directly with children and could help with creating and implementing playground and behaviour management policies’ (DFES 2006: 103).