

Nature Play Spaces for ABRSD Elementary Schools

In 2009, we began planning alternative student play spaces to grass fields, hard tops and play structures and providing more options for those students who are less interested in competitive games. We envisioned spaces in which children may interact with the natural environment under adult supervision during recess breaks and those to which teachers may bring students to meet, talk, listen, write and draw.

Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, was the first book to bring together a new and growing body of research indicating that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development and for the physical and emotional health of children and adults. Being in nature and hearing natural sounds can reduce anxiety and stress. Increased choice and decision-making can improve self-regulatory skill development. More than just raising an alarm, Louv offered practical solutions and simple ways to heal the broken bond—one was in our schoolyards. The district engaged teachers with a Research-Practice Seminar using this book and a "Walking With Tom" (Tidman) series of walks through Acton's Conservation Lands. The District engaged parents with the Parent Involvement Project (PIP), as this was their book choice for the year. This was a pivotal time for thinking and planning what we hoped would become a reality.

Last year, ABRSD was very fortunate to receive funding from the Acton Community Preservation Committee (CPC) to design five Nature Play Spaces for the ABRSD elementary schools. Working with our Eileen Sullivan, retired Acton Public Schools Elementary Curriculum Specialist, and Holly Ben-Joseph, Acton resident and Landscape Architect, students, teachers, administrators and parents shared their ideas and wants for the designs. Four of the designs were presented this year to the Acton CPC, and they decided to support funding \$120,000 of our \$131,900 request. (Please note that Boxborough just became a CPA certified town. Boxborough monies will become available next year and, with design plans ready, the district will pursue funding for a Nature Play Space at the Blanchard Memorial School.) The district is contributing \$33,700 worth of labor to make sure this project is collaborative, reasonable and draws on multiple sources of funding - consistent with CPA guidelines.

If approved at Town Meeting, construction will begin July 1.

If schools would like to add additional features, i.e. musical instruments for a few hundred dollars, these could be added by contributions by PTOs, fund-raising, individual gifts and other smaller grants. Eileen Sullivan will continue to work with individual schools to pursue these additional avenues.