School ecology lesson snuffed

Pollution concerns halt garden burn

By Dan Luzadder
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Students at Bromwell Elementary are trying to learn about nature, but parents and faculty say the lesson they're getting is more about environmental politics than the environment itself.

A portion of the playground at the small neighborhood school near Cherry Creek has been turned into a garden of 20 native prairie grasses. The plan was to burn the 3-year-old garden to show how it would flourish after the burn, just as the great prairie fires once reinvigorated the grasslands, said Lois Brick, a Bromwell parent and the garden's designer.

But the application for a permit to burn the 50-by-50-foot garden was denied by the city's environmental watchdog. A letter from an environmental investigator to Brick said the controlled burn would emit too much particulate matter into the air.

The alternative, the letter said, is to take the school's 350 students on a field trip to the Denver Botanic Gardens, which has a much larger prairie-grass exhibit.

That answer contradicts what the school is trying to teach, said Bromwell principal Frank Bingham.

"The garden is really an authentic native ecosystem, and proper management of these kind of ecosystems demand this kind of approach," Bingham said. "If we are teaching our kids the full picture, if we are being honest with them, and this is the proper management strategy, this is what we should do, to burn it."

After the city's Jan. 24 decision, Bromwell parents contacted U.S. Sen. Wayne Allard for help and were referred to the Colorado Air Pollution Control Division. There, they asked for state environmental officials to compare the amount of particulates generated by a 15-minute burn with those generated by buses needed to take the stu-

City snuffs out ecology lesson

She said school officials and parents should have considered burn restrictions before planting but failed to consult with the city Department of Environmental Health before putting in the grasses.

Route takes issue with comparisons between particulate pollutants from a bus trip and the burn of the school's garden of grass.

"These are two different forms of pollution and where the pollutants go are different," she said.

Route said the school has the option of seeking a variance from the city law on open burning. But its next opportunity to get on the agenda is in April. Reaching a final decision could push the issue beyond the end of the school year and beyond the optimum time for burning the garden.

"It's not that fun to run through it when the weeds and things like that poke you," Nathan said. "It's better when there are fresh flowers and grasses growing up. I've always loved doing projects for the school. Doing this burn will be really interesting to watch, and it will just make the school look better."