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Learning Landscapes strives to improve public schoolyards and impact health

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When Lois Brink first set eyes on her child’s schoolyard, she saw it through the eyes of a landscape architect. She noticed its lackluster quality, but she also recognized possibilities.

That was the beginning of what Brink has developed into Learning Landscapes, a program at the College of Architecture and Planning at UC Denver.

A learning landscape is a space at school that contains developmentally appropriate playground equipment, natural features such as trees and shrubs, green fields, and educational designs on asphalt (such as maps or themes specific to the school). Some also feature climbing walls, butterfly gardens, or vegetable gardens.

Now, the Learning Landscapes program has expanded its goals to include not only creating spaces of play, but creating the equipment with a specific function in mind: to be tools children can use in order to stay healthy and fit.

“After [Brink] started developing a lot more of these [schoolyards], it became very evident that physical activity and health became a huge aspect of it as well,” said Sarah Lampe, Research Coordinator at Learning Landscapes.

In 2005 and 2006, Lampe conducted a small study and found that these types of playgrounds increased physical activity and decreased sedentary behavior in elementary schools. Last month, she received a \$3 million grant from the National Institutes of Health so that she could look at these correlations on a larger scale.

The grant will support studies that also incorporate nutrition education programs developed by Dr. James Hill at the Center for Human Nutrition, a part of UCD's School of Medicine. The study will analyze how these schoolyards and nutrition curricula affect childhood obesity rates.

Graduate students will be involved in executing these programs, according to Lampe. The College of Architecture and Planning currently offers a studio class in which graduate students design master plans for the schoolyards based on their interactions with students, parents, and teachers at public schools.

Emily Greenwood took the class last spring and is now an intern at Learning Landscapes. She and fellow intern Jeff Webb have designed the conversion of seven newer playgrounds into Learning Landscapes.

"It's nice to be involved in the community and actually be able to see the change that we're giving to this community," said Greenwood.

In addition to architecture students, Learning Landscapes also uses students from the School of Public Health. These students will be helping with the nutrition curriculum and training physical education teachers so that the program can continue after the research is complete.

Eryn Callahan is pursuing her Master's in public health and has been implementing permanent wellness teams within each school for Learning Landscapes' Livewell Westwood project. According to Callahan, the young populations of South Denver are at risk for adverse health outcomes, as over 60 percent have been identified as overweight or obese.

"These playgrounds are changing the community," Callahan said. "They are giving the community space to play and to be active."

The program so far has targeted areas with less park space and with high-risk, low-income populations.

Learning Landscapes requires schools to allow for public access to their schoolyards. "Opening up those schoolyards actually opened up a whole other resource and asset for the communities," Lampe said. "The schools take a lot more pride in them than they did before."

There are currently 48 Learning Landscapes at public schools across Denver, and a \$450 million school district bond passed by Denver voters last fall will allow for all 37 remaining schools to have them as well. When Landscapes is finished with construction—the target date is 2012—Denver Public Schools will be the first in the nation to have its entire district with renovated schoolyards.

“We do hope that eventually this design, this whole idea spreads,” Lampe said. She said she hopes that the research grant will be part of garnering attention for the project, and inspiring similar work outside Denver.