

MAKING THE LEARNING PLAYGROUND HAPPEN

Bruce Cunningham

I. *GROUNDWORK*

- Come up with a theme or slogan that summarizes what you are trying to do. We chose "Learning Through Play." Use the slogan on T-shirts, literature, posters, etc.
- Name the site, being sure to avoid the name of your school and the word "playground." Carolina Power and Light returned our grant application from "Southern Pines Elementary School PTA" and asked us to resubmit under a different name so they wouldn't be deluged when their annual report listed a school PTA as a grant recipient. We resubmitted and got \$7,500.00. We named our site "Blanchie Carter Discovery Park" to honor a former principal who was respected by all segments of the community.
- Get the State Department of Transportation to put up signs pointing the way to the site. It makes you look official.
- Print a simple brochure to circulate, use at talks, give contributors, etc.
- Figure out what you want to emphasize. After Robin Moore of NCSU School of Design got involved we broadened our scope to include:
 - A. Environmental education.
 - B. Outdoor learning across the curriculum.
 - C. Accessibility for persons with disabilities.
 - D. Just plain fun.
 - E. Moore County heritage (cabin, Plank Road, Village).
 - F. Educational gardening.
- Create a masterplan and expect it to evolve.
- Link up with groups who need you as much as you need them. (The Lion's Club wanted a high visibility project to bolster their dwindling club membership. They gave us \$10,000.00 to help make the park accessible to the visually impaired)

I. *ATTITUDE*

- Make the first thing you put on the site out of the highest quality material you can find. Donors are more likely to give money if they think the facility is going to last. Then vow not to fall below the standard set by the first thing you build.
- Kids and teachers shouldn't have to accept second-rate stuff. The kids loved the idea that their playing field was the same turf the Carolina Panthers pro football team plays on, installed by the same company that did the Charlotte Stadium.
- At the beginning when I would go to a store to buy materials and the clerk found out it was for a public school, he would usually say, "I guess you want the cheapest thing we have." I would invariably respond, "No, I want the best thing you have."

I. ***FINANCE***

- Big money is easier to raise than small money. Bake sales, soup labels, penny jars, etc. are time-consuming and not very profitable. Go for the large contributions from businesses and foundations.
- We are setting up a "Friends of Carter Park" nonprofit corporation to broaden community support.
- Have a professional accountant do the books and send quarterly financial reports to the school superintendent and board members.
- Don't be afraid to go in debt to avoid "phased" projects. A local bank loaned us \$25,000.00 toward buying the playstructure at a ½ point below prime.
- At the outset, don't go to lumber stores, hardware stores, etc. and ask them for donated materials. They get those requests all the time. Instead, talk to the president or manager, set up a charge account, and pay your bills on time. Eventually, the store will be impressed and will be more willing to help. It will be their idea to offer to help a good project rather than reluctantly giving in to a request. For example, about a year after we started, I went to the lumber yard to rent scaffolding. I told the manager to put it on our account. He said, "Don't worry about it, it is a good thing for the school." It saved us \$250.00 and he felt good to offer the assistance on his own initiative. Try to deal with the person in the highest position of authority.
- Don't get competitive bids for materials or service jobs. Be loyal and it will pay dividends. We had a pallet of bricks left over from the gazebo. I called the lumberyard delivery manager and asked if someone could swing by the school the next time they were in the area with a forklift and move them. It was moved the next day.

- People give money to people, not to projects. Don't write and mail solicitation letters. When asking for money from individuals, decide who is the best person to do the asking. Then put together an information packet to give the target individual. Use pledge cards to spread out the contribution. A lot of people have agreed to give us \$1,000.00 – 1,500.00 if they can spread it out over three years. Ask a bank to loan you money on the strength of the pledges.

I. ***PUBLICITY***

- Design a wonderful T-shirt and then sell it for cost to get the public aware of the project.
- Call local civic clubs and ask if you can present programs on the project.
- Do radio talk shows.
- Invite newspaper reporters to the site.
- We did a display at a garden club convention and landscaping conference.

I. ***CONSTRUCTION***

- Build everything to Consumer Product Safety Commission guidelines. It will ease the minds of school board members who worry about liability issues.
- Don't rent or borrow tools. It takes too much time to locate them, return them, sharpen them, etc. Go ahead and buy the tools you will need and then auction them off at a school function when you are done with them.
- Go to the courthouse and find out who assigns people who have to do community service because of Driving While Impaired convictions and other offenses. We also use prisoners. We have unlimited free manual labor at our disposal. We dug fall zones under the swings by hand.
- Go to the county tax department and buy an aerial photo of the site. In North Carolina they cost \$5.00 and are very helpful in laying out the site because they are to scale. (1" = 100')

- Fly over the site before construction begins and take aerial photos. Do it periodically. People love looking at aerial photos.

I. *DEALING WITH THE SCHOOL BOARD*

- Maintenance supervisors and board members are reluctant to allow parent groups to build things on site because they usually mess it up. Earn their trust.
- During a school board meeting make a presentation and give each member a T-shirt.
- A principal or teacher can't cut through the chain of command like a parent can. We always deal with the person on the top first.
- Keep them informed. We mail them quarterly financial reports of the project. Send them clippings of the project, photos.

VII. *PATIENCE*

- Be patient and try to keep focused. It's hard to do. The 'barn-raising" playground model is quite a splash but it doesn't allow for modification and improvement of the plan as it goes along. A teacher told me her kids look forward to each Monday to go out on the playground and see if something new has happened.
- Don't reinvent the wheel. Don't be shy to seek out help. My address is:

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