

Governor Martin O'Malley's
Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature

John R. Griffin, Chair
Secretary, Maryland Department of Natural Resources

Nancy S. Grasmick, Chair
State Superintendent of Schools,
Maryland State Department of Education

May 12, 2010
10 a.m.-12 p.m.

Prince George's County Department of Parks and Recreation

Welcome and Introductions:

Ronnie Gathers, Director of Prince George's County Parks and Recreation gave us a brief introduction about the PG county parks and recreation system.

Brief introductions around the room.

Nancy Strinste – gave a talk and Q&A session on natural play spaces
Remember the special spaces and places in our childhood. Those images are powerful and stick with us through time. As designers, it is our responsibility to help create those spaces. Swedish studies – children with less hardscape did better with respect to attention, creativity, socialization, and health. V. Sullivan did a study on language development and found that vocabulary is more developed when children play in natural play spaces. Nancy talked about studies on social hierarchy, and how bacteria in the soil produce serotonin when in contact with our skin. Think about creating distinct outdoor rooms. Think about creating pathways and circulation that encourage active play and have quiet spaces. Varying the terrain has play value. Shade structures can be part of learning opportunities. Allow children to use their senses (touch, smell, manipulation). Give children ownership of the space...allow them to take care of it, have control over it, and manipulate it. Creating these spaces is a collaborative process. Think about creating gathering places that bring children together in different ways and incorporate various subjects such as art, science, music, and history. More of Nancy's work can be seen on: www.earlyspace.com

Question: What are the legal issues associated with created these spaces on school grounds?

Answer: Collaborate with the school systems – they know the legal issues and concerns of the parents.

Question: What is happening in MD?

Answer: Anne English is doing work on natural play.

Question: What is the cost comparison of natural play spaces to traditional play spaces?
Answer: It is much less expensive to create a natural play space.

Question: Do portable play pieces get stolen?
Answer: It should be part of a maintenance plan to replenish natural elements such as tree cookies and pine cones.

Question: How do you design trails to incorporate more activity?
Answer: Discovery trail; have different destinations around the trail that are natural elements. Think about how children move through the space – balance beams, things to crawl under and through, etc.

Comment: Playground manufacturers are realizing the need to incorporate natural spaces.

Question: Does it make sense for our Partnership to frame a recommendation to parks and recreation that provides guidance and support for places trying to do this?

Answer: North Carolina is in the process of doing that. They are looking at re-writing environmental safety guidelines. i.e. going barefoot and climbing trees.

Comment: Parks are looking at specific things to purchase.

Comment: We are going from moving to completely uncontrolled spaces to completely controlled spaces, to a mixture. It should be easy to look at developing some guidelines; involve the universities.

Tracy Bowen proposed that we form an official sub-committee of the Partnership on natural play spaces.

Urban Natural Play Spaces- Morgan State University

Dr. Glenn Smith gave a brief overview of the program at Morgan State University. They have a demonstration site at Dickie Elementary School. Rob Lowe introduced their research. They worked on developing a communication tool for the layperson and the landscape architect to communicate in a similar language. They looked at Baltimore City as a test site, developmental needs of children, learning opportunities. Next, they looked at school districts in Baltimore city and street patterns, building density, green canopy, land use and land forms. Where in the city are there opportunities to connect kids with nature? Where are there already green spaces? What are the spaces in most need?

Roberta talked about types of children's needs: nurturing, energizing, ordering, connecting, and achieving. How do kids engage with nature? Self guided and mentor guided. Gave an example of a bench-wall planter and how it fits into Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Dr. Smith recommended we look at Roberta's thesis on childhood development and natural play spaces. Sara's thesis will be available in the fall: edible play spaces.

Question: Have they done projects in other areas?

Answer: Yes!

Question: PG County is suburban/urban. The car is how people get to their facilities and there are some that come on foot, they have a paradigm on how to put development in a park. As designers and developers of the space, how do they grapple with those issues? Cars, pedestrians, children, etc.

Answer: We do not do enough to design spaces where children live. The parks need to get out to where people live so people can walk to them. There is value to an alleyway. Be creative about creating corridors and vulcanizing spaces where kids can get to them on foot.

Dr. Smith: Students (at the University) would like to have more projects brought to them.

Sarah: Looking at ways to identify micro areas in urban settings; parking lots, alleyways, sidewalks are what we need to take advantage of.

Vince: Residents don't know who owns the public green space. Vince is looking for people to work with him on the minority engagement in children in nature.

Roberta's dissertation will be available in a couple of months.

National update: Julie Dieguez

House and senate committees are working on mark up and should be done by June. There are 100 cosponsors in the house and almost 20 senate supporters. The MD coalition was very supportive in securing Mikulski as a cosponsor.

Griffin: President appointed a green cabinet to develop an agenda for conservation for the 21st century. Several outcomes relate to youth and the outdoors. The cabinet will host listening sessions around the country. Part of the discussion is revitalization for land acquisition of recreation areas. Secretary Salazar is committed to finding funding for that program.

Dr. Grasmick (via phone) – Update on graduation requirement.

COMAR going to the state board on May 26 at 10 o'clock. It will state that Environmental Literacy is a high school graduation requirement and that existing courses would be able to meet that requirement. It would be helpful to send letters to the state board and Dr. Grasmick indicating support for that position. John Griffin will be able to attend. Kevin Maxwell will be invited to speak on behalf of the superintendents. All superintendents were made aware and were supportive.

Griffin: What are questions that we should be prepared to answer or advocate for?

Dr. Grasmick: With superintendents supportive and no requirement to develop new courses, she is not expecting any opposition. Superintendent support will be beneficial as will letters of support.

Julie Dieguez: MDNCLI is ready to ask for membership to support it. Letters can go directly to board members or to Dr. Grasmick.

Steve Barry: When will we have specific language?

Dr. Grasmick: She will send it to Elena.

Jamie Baxter: When this was presented to the superintendents, what changes did the superintendents anticipate?

Dr. Grasmick: Several systems are eager to develop courses, but didn't want it done as a mandate. They prefer to have a gradual evolution of attention, coursework, and experiences for kids. Superintendents for instruction will be looking at models on how to ensure the rigor is maintained. They may also want to get with Gary Heath since he is familiar with the process.

Speakers Bureau is up and running. If you are interested in talking to community groups about children in nature, please contact Catherine Shanks.

Mapping the Movement in Maryland – Elena

DNR has created a static map on where you can find children in nature activities. We hope to make this a more interactive map by the end of the summer and include more counties, non-profit organizations, and more.

Next Meeting: September 16th at MAEOE headquarters in Jessup, Maryland.