

Montpelier Union Elementary

# School Playground

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## An opportunity for re-invention.

As the existing Union Elementary School Playground in Montpelier reached maturity, it was important that both school and community members worked together to envision its future. The playground served not just the elementary school, but had become an important community and neighborhood resource, remaining busy after-school and on weekends. The school community envisioned a nature-based design solution to better integrate PLAY + LEARNING, while also addressing accessibility, erosion, and stormwater issues. SE Group led the consultant team as Landscape Architect, with Engineering Ventures as civil engineer, and the Johnson Company/VHB was the environmental consultant. The team created a design that increases PLAY options, educational opportunities, stabilizes the site, and transforms it into a valuable resource for the local community.

## Addressing the challenges.

Existing playgrounds at the school were installed when a new cafeteria wing was constructed in the mid 1990's. Many of the existing site features—including walls, pavements, and stairs—had reached their lifespan and were beginning to fail. The school frequently dealt with flooding of the paved areas outside doorways due to a failed stormwater system. Outdated play equipment and little shade offered limited accessibility and activities for students- who could frequently be found playing in the woods behind the school.

In addition to these challenges, soil tests performed early in the project identified isolated areas of contaminated soils—remnants of both the local site history as well as the industrial past of Vermont's Capital City. The project team worked with a local environmental consultant and the Vermont DEC to develop the corrective action plan for soil remediation.

## Crafting solutions.

The concept for the playground design integrates structured and unstructured play opportunities into the site, adjusts grades to incorporate PLAY and access into the hillsides, and addresses stormwater collection and treatment throughout the site. Site circulation pathways define landscaped “spaces”



where more intensive play areas and equipment such as a large climbing structure could be thoughtfully positioned. Grades along the side of the existing school were pulled back carving an accessible pathway into the slope to the upper playground. PLAY amenities including an embankment slide, stone amphitheater, and an elevated outdoor classroom called the “NEST” are incorporated into hillside, increasing the benefit and use of the large hillside.

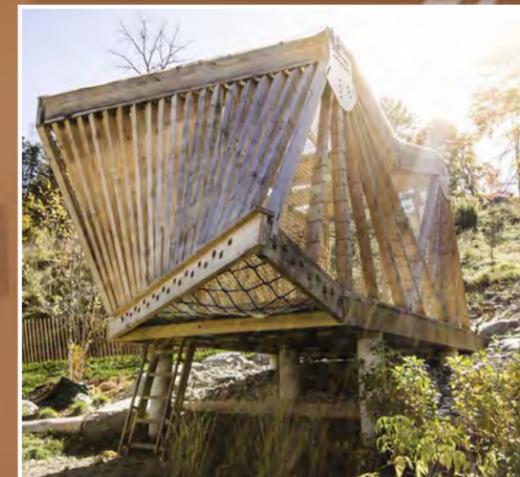
Guided by the community's vision, the newly constructed playground uses natural materials as a primary aspect of the site design. Locally sourced black locust logs are used extensively for curbing, stair treads, and climbing elements. Native trees, shrubs, and perennials help define play areas, provide shade, treat stormwater and provide LEARNING opportunities for students. Quarried limestone blocks are used as sitting walls throughout the site and amphitheater.

Stormwater is filtered through river rock swales, sediment basins, and a bioretention swale and is ultimately treated in two gravel wetlands installed at the perimeter of the school. These constructed wetlands are set within gabion walls and planted with native shrubs including red dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), perennials (*Aster novae-angliae*), and sedges (*Carex vulpinoidea*). The gravel wetlands provide habitat and excellent opportunities for science and nature-based LEARNING.

## A revitalized community asset.

The playground's design uses each element as an opportunity to provide unstructured play and education, supplemented with commercial play equipment to provide adventure and motion. The Montpelier Union Elementary School Playground Project realizes the community's vision, incorporating PLAY into the daily life and rhythm of the students and the community at large. Creative site design. Natural materials. Sustainable approaches. Every opportunity on the site is now a chance to PLAY + LEARN. ■

## Facility Feature



Landscape Architect: SE Group  
Civil Engineer: Engineering Ventures  
Environmental Consultant: The Johnson Company/VHB  
Vestibule Architect: Black River Design  
NEST Architect: Norwich University Design + Build Collaborative  
General Contractor: Engineers Construction Inc.  
Landscape Contractor: DiStefano Landscaping