

Dufferin-Peel unveils enhanced outdoor learning environments for early learners

Kindergarten students at 25 Dufferin-Peel Catholic schools will enjoy newly enhanced outdoor learning environments in their kindergarten playground areas this year.

These new outdoor learning areas are part of Phase 2 of a multi-year initiative that adheres to the principles of early learning pedagogy being implemented in Dufferin-Peel Catholic elementary schools. Nancy Marshall, communications officer with the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, said Holy Family Elementary School in Bolton is one of the 25 schools.

To date, 44 sites have been completed.

The newly enhanced playgrounds include several different areas and elements that stimulate creative and active learning, including a large sand area, classroom area with blackboard and tree trunk seating, wooden gazebo with seating and flower boxes, paved areas with bike paths and other markings, and storage. These areas have a mix of hard and soft surfaces and shade. Trees are planted on the outer perimeter where possible.

“Prior to proceeding with changes to existing playground areas, board staff researched similar initiatives across North America and consulted with principals, child care agencies, architects and others in order to develop system-wide standards with accessibility in mind,” said Superintendent of Early Years, Community Relations and Partnerships Marianne Mazzorato. “These enhancements support an appropriate focus on the natural environment across the curriculum.”

A centerpiece to each outdoor learning environment is an animal indigenous to Ontario (such as bear, raccoon or owl) that has been carved from reclaimed wood. This concept was designed to support the board's strategic plan of encouraging respectful and sustainable environmental practices and to nurture children's sacred trust of the environment and the creatures with which they share the world. The animal was specifically chosen by each school and will be officially unveiled the first day of school.

The initial phase of the refreshed outdoor learning environments focused on schools with child care centres, with most completed by fall 2014 and the balance to be in place this September. Child care and kindergarten yards situated immediately adjacent to each other have been combined to create one outdoor early learning space. Where yards are not adjacent, complementary amenities have been created in each yard, with both spaces available to school and child care programs. Local school and child care staff work together to develop schedules and a learning environment that provides access and learning opportunities for all attending early learners.

An annual process has been put in place to create outdoor early learning environments at the remaining elementary schools.