
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**City News -- Made in New York: Out2Play Helps Fill Playground Void**

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On a walk through Manhattan a few years ago, Andrea Wenner noticed that many schoolchildren had nowhere to play.

"Kids, during recess time, were sitting on a curb or street," she said. "It left an impression on me."

So much so that this week -- five years after she graduated from Columbia Business School and decided to do something about it -- Ms. Wenner's nonprofit opened its 118th playground at PS 71 in Queens.

The nonprofit, called Out2Play, is among a handful whose efforts have helped nudge New York City on a playground-building binge as a way to help children get exercise, shed obesity and improve their quality of life.

After getting her MBA in 2005, Ms. Wenner set out to build playgrounds for hundreds of public schools that needed them.

Now, after raising \$30 million from public and private sources for Out2Play, she has built 118 playgrounds and has roughly 45 to finish before 2012.

By summer's end, Out2Play had built playgrounds for roughly 13%, or 85,000, of the 660,000 K-8 students in the city.

This fall, as school resumed, thousands of schoolchildren at 38 public schools had new playgrounds, including PS 340 and PS 110 in the Bronx and PS 206 in Brooklyn.

Ms. Wenner's initial observation spurred her to put numbers on an urban reality: More than half of the city's elementary-school children had no playground access. She also discovered high asthma and obesity rates for city school children.

The city Department of Education said 18% of New York City's children in public schools in kindergarten through eighth grade were overweight in 2008-09 and 22% were obese.

Out2Play was founded with \$250,000 in seed money from private-equity executive Russell Carson's family. To finish the remaining schools, Ms. Wenner has to raise \$1.5 million in private funding to match \$12 million in a multiyear grant from the city Department of Education.

Shortly after Ms. Wenner launched Out2Play, the city became more involved in building playgrounds, committing \$56.7 million in its 20-year plan to open spaces and playgrounds, especially in underserved neighborhoods. The goal is to have a playground within a 10-minute walk of every New Yorker according to Mayor Bloomberg's 20-year plan for the city.

Since the 1970s, "one of the reasons New York parks have turned around so dramatically has been public-private partnerships," said Adrian Benepe, commissioner for Parks and Recreation. He said nonprofits such as Out2Play and two others -- the Trust for Public Land and Take the Field -- "have been hugely beneficial in providing leverage" by providing private support if government entities match it with public support.

Mr. Benepe's department is now converting 256 elementary school yards to playground projects by 2013 that will be open to the public after school hours, on weekends and during school breaks. These efforts have boosted the city's roughly 1,000 government-related playgrounds by 25% since 2007.

It has also drawn star architects to design playgrounds. Frank Gehry is planning an elaborate playground in

Battery Park with the Battery Conservancy.

Architect David Rockwell's Imagination Playground opened in July at Burling Slip in Lower Manhattan. It has blue foam blocks that let children build structures or artistic pieces. Landscape architecture firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates this summer opened its third notable playground, a massive space at Brooklyn Bridge Park.

"The best of what's happening in the country relative to play is happening in New York," said Darell Hammond, CEO of the Washington, D.C. -- based playground-advocacy organization KaBoom!. "They are quickly emerging as a role model."

The scene at PS 17 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, might be one such model. In May, months after completion of a new playground hundreds of children ran on a track, traversed jungle gyms and played four square on the large playground Out2Play built on what used to be a simple black-top lot next to the school.

Students, faculty and staff participated in the design of the playground, which cost \$500,000 to build. Students drew pictures of what they wanted included in the playground. "In the end, we got exactly what we wanted," said Robert Marchi, principal of P.S. 17.

The sixth-graders like the handball court. Seventh- and eighth-graders use the basketball courts that double as soccer fields, tennis courts and running tracks. Students are always supervised on the playground and often have fitness games and routines with teachers.

Lorraine Reddy, a teacher for prekindergartners in special-education classes, said the jungle gym has helped her students. "Just being able to climb has made a difference in their muscles and motor skills," she said.

"This is why we do this," said Ms. Wenner, standing amid dozens of youngsters playing hopscotch and climbing ladders. "It's a bright spot in an area that's a little bit bleak in some cases."

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