

ipatNews

Iowa Program for Assistive Technology

A program of the Center for Disabilities and Development

Hoover Elementary School's Playground for All

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When I was asked to be part of the Hoover Elementary playground committee in Iowa City, I immediately said yes. As the Funding Services Coordinator for the Iowa Program for Assistive Technology, I knew that the playgrounds at many schools throughout Iowa are not accessible enough to allow for fun, integrated play for all students. I have had more than one call from a parent on this topic. I knew that support and planning for accessibility had to occur from day one of the project.

Hoover has a relatively high percentage of students classified as the most challenged special education students, so integrated accessibility was a high priority. Current and recent special education students have included those with a variety of mobility issues: students who use wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, braces, as well as students who use no adapted equipment but have mobility issues due to medical conditions such as cerebral palsy and partial paralysis. Hoover also has an early education special needs classroom so that students from ages 3-12 attend Hoover.

As a part of the Hoover Elementary Playground for All committee, I got to work on some interesting questions: how can the playground address the needs of all of Hoover's students? What features did it need to have to insure that both the kids with disabilities and those without would have what they need to have fun? What was possible given the limitations of space and money?

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A Hoover student enjoys the driving panel thanks to the accessible surface.



Hoover's Playground for All has ramp access to the upper structure.

Playground for All

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Hoover's previous playground was built in 1990. Then, as now, it was a playground that served as a model for its time. The design of the previous playground gave us good options from which to plan the new one (see photo). Parents of special needs students at Hoover had included a gently sloping sidewalk to facilitate access between the lower level and the higher level. The extensive "sandbox" was at wheelchair height so that students could wheel up to it and play. The upper level was a wide platform that provided accessible space above the main play area. Even with this innovative design, safety standards and accessibility standards have changed since 1990. In 2001, a playground audit revealed numerous safety and accessibility deficiencies, primarily related to safety fall zones and the difficulty of maneuvering through sand.

For all the children to be able to play together, there needed to be access to as much of the playground as we could manage. One of the first design features we settled on (and



one of the easiest to implement) was ramp access to the main upper playground structure. Usually, ramps can be costly because of the gentle slope required, 1 inch of drop for every 1 foot of height. Thanks to the geographic blessing of a hill, and the historical blessing of the switchback sidewalk, our ramp could come straight out from the hillside onto the upper level. This provides access to the two large hexagon-shaped decks. These decks mean that all children can have the sensation of being up high and have an exciting view of the



Hoover's previous playground, 1990.



3-D rendering of Hoover's Playground for All, courtesy of Outdoor Recreation Products.

playground. Once there, we included specific panel pieces such as an accessible periscope, a ball maze panel and a tube talker that is connected to its counterpart on the lower level.

The upper decks also provide a lower level “club house” space. We made sure to leave off some of the loop seats between the bars so that children in wheelchairs or other mobility devices could enter. Additionally, there are a Navigator panel, a Zoo panel and a Store panel all at ground level.

The critical accessibility element for the lower level main play structures was the poured-in-place rubber surfacing. Unlike the ramp for the upper level, this was an element with an additional cost (see “Where did we get the \$\$?”). It is also is another element that makes Hoover’s playground unique in the Iowa City Community School District. No other school in the district has either ramp access to its upper level or poured-in-place access on the ground. Poured-in-place surfacing allows for the easiest access to persons of any mobility level, with or without any adaptive equipment.

From a technical standpoint, the playground design exceeds the requirements of the ADA: Six elevated components are required to be accessible, this playground has nine. Six components must be accessible by a transfer module, there are eight. Eight ground level components are required to be accessible, twelve are accessible.

Suzanne Falk, special education teacher at Hoover, notes: “There aren’t too many places in the country where one can find the support for students with disabilities like we have at Hoover.”

This project took place over the better part of three years. When it was finished we had what we set out to build: a fun, safe playground where all students could play together. ♦

Funding News

Where did we get the money?

Many accessibility features, including the upper level ramp, were incorporated into the initial design of the main playground structure and resulted in little additional cost. The largest accessibility cost was the poured-in-place rubber surfacing.

In addition to the general playground fund, a separate Accessibility Fund was established to raise money for the accessible surfacing. The hypothesis was that there would be resources available specifically for this Fund. Thankfully, this proved to be the case.

The biggest source of funding came from an anonymous private donor family, in the form of two matching \$5,000 grants. This family was supportive of the project’s goals and interested in the idea that the surfacing and accessibility of the project could serve as a role model for other playgrounds. The general playground fund contributed a significant portion of the funds. The plan was that the general fund would contribute an amount equal to the costs of using a combination of wood fiber chips and poured-in-place pathways. (This was also our “Plan B” in case we didn’t raise the needed funds to install poured-in-place for the entire fall zone of the main structure.)

The rest of the money came from a variety of public and private resources. A City of Iowa City PIN grant was awarded to cover part of the costs. The largest non-profit donation came from the Pilot Club of Iowa City, a community organization dedicated to serving those with brain injury and working toward the prevention of further such injuries. The Pilot Club of Iowa City also wrote a successful application for a matching grant from the Pilot International Foundation. “We like the Hoover Playground because the surfacing will protect kids and others from brain-related injuries,” says Karen Tack of the Pilot Club of Iowa City. “In addition, children with disabilities can enjoy much of the same equipment as their non-disabled peers.”

Other contributors included: the Noon Optimist Club, the Sunshine Optimist Club, the Hoover Cub Scout Pack 201, the AM Rotary Club, Coldwell Banker Real Estate, River City Dental office, and a teacher’s memorial fund all combined to reach the needed total of over \$32,000.

Not only did we reach our financial goal, but the vision of providing a model has come true as well. There have been a number of inquiries from other schools about the Hoover Playground for All and at least one of those is planning to raise the funds needed to install poured-in-place surfacing for the students at their local school.

Changes to IPAT Newsletter

Starting with this issue of the IPAT newsletter, you will see some changes. First, the name will change to Iowa COMPASS to reflect the name of our information and referral service. We've decided to provide the newsletter on a monthly basis, so we can reduce the number of pages from 8 to 4.

We will drop the Used Equipment Referral Service and focus on one article, funding news, and product of the month. You can still get the Used Equipment Referral List of equipment separately each month by calling the Iowa COMPASS office and requesting a copy. You can also be placed on an e-mail notification list to remind you each month when the list of equipment is updated, or you can always check online at:

www.uiowa.edu/infotech/UERS.htm

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