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Nonprofit builds new school playground

By JESS WISLOSKI

Ready? Set? Clamber!

Just in time for the new school year, kids at Morrisania's Community Elementary School 53 received something to help them breathe easier. At least in the long run.

In place of a long-vacant patch of asphalt next to the 168th St. school, a playground in vibrant colors has sprung up.

Open to the community, the new park also has a running track, basketball court and blacktop games.

"It started out with nothing," said Andrea Wenner, founder and executive director of Out2Play, a nonprofit which funded and built the playground. "They had this big asphalt space, and they have one of the highest asthma rates in the city," she said.

It's the first project completed by Out2Play, dedicated to building and refurbishing city public school playgrounds.

"A lot of schools don't have gymnasiums or that kind of thing," she said. "We want to give them an outdoor space where they're encouraged to be physically active."

According to Wenner, more than half of the city's elementary schools have no playground access.

Morrisania and High Bridge have some of the highest asthma hospitalization rates in the city - 17% of South Bronx children suffer from asthma, doubling the city average.

And Bronx obesity rates are the highest in the five boroughs - the South Bronx suffering worst, with 24%-31% of the population obese.

"We were picking schools based on statistics [and] also what parks or playgrounds they have nearby," said Wenner. "A school like CES 53 has nothing nearby."

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Working with Bronx members of the City Council and Borough President Adolfo Carrión has infused her group with \$2.5 million to spend on Bronx schools.

"The parents are really excited that there's a playground within their neighborhood," said Windis Jaquez, 31, parent coordinator at CES 53, and the parent of three.


Traditionally, the School Construction Authority, which is overseen by the Education Department, is in charge of projects built on school grounds, but Wenner said playgrounds weren't a priority.


"We are really making an effort in our capital plan to update and create more playgrounds," said Margie Feinberg, a DOE spokeswoman. Many schools go without play space because they lack room, she said.

Wenner said that was an issue, but noted it also wasn't a priority of the construction authority.


"We want to make sure that every school that has space available for a playground can get one," said Wenner.

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