

Playgrounds are an essential part of the school environment, where students can have fun, socialize, and develop their physical and cognitive skills. However, not all playgrounds are designed to accommodate the diverse needs and abilities of all students, especially those with disabilities or extra needs. This document provides some guidelines for schools to consider when purchasing playground equipment with accessibility for all students in mind. The goal is to create playgrounds that are safe, inclusive, and enjoyable for everyone.

Accessibility Principles and Best Practices

Beyond the minimum requirements, schools should also follow some accessibility principles and best practices when purchasing playground equipment. These include:

- **Universal design:** This means designing playgrounds that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Specialized designs (e.g. wheelchair swings) can sometimes exclude, rather than include. Universal design considers the diversity of human abilities, preferences, and characteristics and aims to create playgrounds that are equitable, flexible, simple, and supportive of all children being able to play and learn alongside their peers.
- **Inclusive play:** This means creating playgrounds that foster social interaction, participation, and belonging among all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Inclusive play considers the emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of play and aims to create welcoming, engaging, stimulating, and challenging playgrounds.
- **Accessible play:** This means providing playgrounds that are physically accessible and barrier-free for all students, especially those with mobility, sensory, or cognitive impairments. Accessible play considers the functional and environmental aspects of play, and aims to create playgrounds that are reachable, navigable, operable, and understandable.

Accessibility Features and Examples

Based on the accessibility principles and best practices, schools should look for playground equipment that has the following features:

- Play components that are varied, diverse, and offer multiple levels of challenge and sensory stimulation. For example, swings, slides, climbers, spinners, tunnels, bridges, musical instruments, etc.
- Play components that are accessible and adaptable for different abilities and needs. For example, ramps, transfer platforms, handrails, grab bars, high-back seats, harnesses, tactile indicators, braille labels, auditory cues, etc.

- Play components that are interactive and cooperative and encourage socialization and communication among students. For example, merry-go-rounds, sandboxes, water tables, play panels, puzzles, games, etc.
- Incorporate high contrast colours, especially at elevation changes, to support individuals with visual impairments.
- Surfacing material is the responsibility of the district. While it is not always possible to have surfaces that are 100% navigable by a wheelchair, every effort will be made to ensure that there are firm pathways leading up to key pieces of equipment. For example, rubber tiles, poured-in-place rubber, engineered wood fiber, synthetic turf, etc.

Specific consideration should be given to including one or more of the following universal structures that can be used by all students:

- Musical structures that have a horizontal orientation and large target area, that provide access for a wheelchair to fit under, e.g. Pegasus metallophone or drums.
- A larger structure that allows for multiple students to play on and use imagination and movement, e.g. Swayfun.
- A picnic table that is wheelchair accessible



Questions for reflection:

- What structures have been selected that are accessible to students in wheelchairs or with other mobility challenges?
- Who have you consulted regarding playground accessibility?

Purchasing playground equipment that is accessible for all students, including future students, is a worthwhile investment for schools. It can benefit the physical, mental, and social well-being of all students and the school community. It is not possible to define what accessibility looks like for everyone, but it is important to ask questions and seek input. By following the guidelines in this document, schools can create playgrounds that are safe, inclusive, and enjoyable for everyone.

Developed by the Abbotsford Accessibility Advisory Committee, May 2025