

Project to Spread Play at City Schools in Need

By **Marissa Stern** - September 20, 2018



Kids playing in the new Fiesta Playground at Emlen Elementary School. | Photos by Lon Fredric Palitz

The “before” photos of the schoolyard at Eleanor C. Emlen Elementary School show a desolate lot, with cracked pavement and some scrawled chalk-drawn hopscotch boards.

Indeed, many schools in the School District of Philadelphia offer little in the way of an actual playground for students.

The Lindy Family Charitable Foundation hopes to change that.

Elaine, Alan and Frank Lindy — the third generation of Lindys to work in the family real estate business — discovered after attending a National Liberty Museum Young Heroes program last year a link between a lack of playgrounds and an increase in bullying among students.

They wondered how many schools in the city did not have an adequate play area and, after some research, found about 100 Philadelphia schools had only an asphalt or cement surface to serve as a playground.

“These kids step out and there is nothing to sit on, nothing to engage their hearts and minds, and it was quite a surprise,” Elaine Lindy recalled. “And we wondered, why is that? Why are there so few? Why are these kids left with nothing?”

Acting with the foundation, they spoke with experts in different areas of the nonprofit sector and found that a playground could cost between \$500,000 and up to \$2 million depending on the equipment.



Kids playing in the new Fiesta Playground at Emlen

Elementary School. | Photo by Lon Fredric Palitz

Factors such as grass maintenance, surface area and different requirements depending on the type of play equipment that is used — structures higher than 18 inches, for instance, require soft ground — greatly raise the costs.

“What can we do to bypass all these hurdles?” the Lindys asked. If they could build a structure that had no footings or drilling, no stormwater management, no climbing structures over 18 inches, and other deterring features, “what would we have left that would be fun and easy to do?”

Enter: the [Fiesta Playground](#), so-called because “fiesta’ suggests lots of fun stuff all over the place, which is what we have.” Its motto is “quick, easy and fun.”

They created a menu of items approved by the district from which schools can choose a selection based on a unique points system to construct a hand-picked playground.

But a key piece of a Fiesta Playground is the price tag. It costs \$100,000 including a \$10,000 refurbishment budget, a significant difference from a standard playground’s cost.

“For the same money you would do one, you could do 10,” she said.

On Sept. 13, the first Fiesta Playground opened at Emlen, much to students’ excitement.

The once-bare schoolyard is now bursting with color through painted murals, games and bright maps of the United States and Philadelphia. A grassy structure in a dome configuration allows kids to climb and play. A basketball court gives kids the chance to shoot some hoops and get some exercise.



Elaine Lindy with Emlen Elementary School Principal

Tammy Thomas. | Photo by Carolyn Hirsh Lindy

“It meant a great deal to me. I was very moved,” said Lindy of the opening. “I’ve tried a lot of social action type things in my lifetime and many I’m still involved with, and I don’t know if any of them have been so immediately and tangibly impactful on me personally as this, because hearing the sounds of these kids and [them] loving it and running around and being happy compared to what the space looked like before — it was like Mars, there’s nothing.”

The foundation set up the playground over the summer in about three and a half months.

“We were certainly excited and extremely honored to be the first recipient of this schoolyard beautification project,” said Emlen Principal Tammy Thomas, who noted it will be open after school and on weekends for the community.

The staff, parents, students and community were involved every step of the way, she said, and were “thrilled” with how it turned out. One student told her at the opening that “recess is the best part of our day now.”

For Lindy, the creation of Fiesta Playgrounds is an act of tikkun olam.

"Now's the time of year for us to really feel that," she said, noting the timing of the High Holidays.

As they plan with the school district and the school board for more playgrounds in the future, she said the foundation is seeking funding partners to contribute through various sponsorship levels.

"We want to reach these hundred schools, but we need help to do that," she stressed.

She encourages any businesses interested to email her at elindy@comehometolindy.com.

The playgrounds, she said, will provide a necessary service for kids not just now, but in the future.

"It's hard to imagine you'd have the school surrounded by this vast, empty earthscape with almost nothing on it," she said. "That's the experience of thousands of schoolchildren every day in Philadelphia.

"With enough help, we'll really roll this out."

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