

## San Francisco Playground Reassessment 2008

*A Project of the Playground Initiative*

### Introduction

The Playground Initiative is a joint venture of the Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC) and the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department (RPD). This initiative focuses specifically on upgrading the 26 playgrounds that were identified as "failing" in the 2008 NPC Playground Report Card, published in April of 2008. Although failed playgrounds still have value as recreational play spaces, they require increased adult supervision and maintenance attention because they are not as safe as we would like them to be. Through community workdays and stewardship, the Initiative works towards ensuring that children can play and exercise safely outside, especially in lower-income neighborhoods where parks are the only outdoor play spaces.

This report discusses the results of playground improvements recently conducted at 11 sites identified as failing in April of 2008 and includes the grades for the 11 sites as reassessed in November of 2008.

### Method

#### Playgrounds

Throughout 2008, NPC and RPD made improvements at 11 of the 26 failed playgrounds identified in the Report Card. These improvements varied by playground, but included the following tasks: trash pickup, sand sifting, beautification projects, plantings, weeding, sand addition, and equipment painting. Community volunteers, led by RPD and NPC staff, completed most Playground Initiative work. However, some improvements were carried out by RPD staff at the request of NPC and with NPC's support. In total, there were 12 Playground Initiative workdays in 2008. See the table below for a listing of completed workdays.

<u>Workday Date</u>	<u>Playground</u>	<u>Sand Purchased<sup>1</sup></u>
June 28th & October 18th	West Sunset Playground	N/A
July 19th & August 9th	Lincoln Park Playground	10 tons
August 16th	Joe DiMaggio Playground	13 tons
August 23rd	Merced Heights Playground	23 tons
October 18th	Sunset Playground	10 tons
October 25th	Silver Terrace Playground	N/A
November 8 <sup>th</sup>	Crocker Amazon Playground—Italy	20 tons

<sup>1</sup> In 2008, the Playground Initiative received funding from the Miriam and Peter Haas Fund, a portion of which could be used on materials, and a San Francisco Beautiful grant of \$5,000 which allowed NPC to provide clean, arsenic-free sand at several of the failed playground locations.

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November 8 <sup>th</sup>	Crocker Amazon Playground—Geneva	5 tons
November 15 <sup>th</sup>	Cayuga Playground	10 tons to be purchased 12/08
November 22 <sup>nd</sup>	Herz Playground	N/A
N/A	Youngblood Coleman	N/A

**Survey Instrument**

All 11 playgrounds were reassessed after improvement work was completed. To ensure comparability, playgrounds were reassessed using the same survey that was implemented in the 2008 Playground Report Card.

**Survey Schedule**

NPC staff reassessed all eleven playgrounds in November of 2008:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Playground</b>
11/12/08	Crocker Amazon (Italy), Crocker Amazon (Geneva)
11/15/08	Cayuga
11/20/08	Sunset, Joe DiMaggio, Merced Heights, Lincoln Park
11/22/08	Herz
11/26/08	Youngblood Coleman, Silver Terrace, West Sunset

**Overall Results and Trends**

Of the 11 playgrounds, 7 improved in grade after Playground Initiative efforts.

Many playgrounds had issues that could not be easily addressed by a volunteer workday such as corrosion. In fact, corrosion was a very significant problem throughout the failed playgrounds, as was a lack of sufficient fall surface area and lack of appropriate signage.

While many playgrounds could not be upgraded by a workday, others were greatly improved by simple tasks such as trash removal and sand sifting, since hazardous materials such as broken glass present a significant risk to children. Simply painting wooden elements also helped to upgrade playgrounds by sealing in arsenic, eliminating splinters, and beautifying the play area.

Further, by partnering with RPD on the Initiative and conducting several site visits to playgrounds in anticipation of volunteer workdays, some safety concerns that were outside the scope of volunteer improvements were addressed by RPD. For example, an old wooden skin, splintered and with protruding nails that had been placed around the metal framework of the swings at Youngblood Coleman was removed by RPD as it was no longer useful and had become unsafe. While this did not result in an overall grade improvement for the playground, unsafe and broken material was removed from the site. This example reinforces that the grading process is intended to draw attention to the most hazardous playgrounds though some of the hazards may be ephemeral, such as glass in the sand, while others, such as heavily corroded metal swing sets, can only truly be addressed with a total replacement.

## **Results by Playground**

The following section describes the work completed at each site along with major issues at each playground. The initial grade of the playground as well as the reassessment grade is shown in parentheses next to the name of the playground.

### **Cayuga Playground (D to F)**

*Workday on November 15, 2008. Tasks completed: weeding, sand sifting, trash pickup, and plantings in park.*

Swing seats and slide beds were in worse condition at time of second evaluation. Additional corrosion was apparent as well. Wooden surfaces and benches still need sanding and painting. Pipe ends remain uncapped. Signage remains incomplete and there are still bushes and trees that prevent nearby pedestrians from easily viewing playground.

### **Crocker Amazon Playground—Italy (F to C)**

*Workday on November 8, 2008. Tasks completed: weeding, sand installation, sand sifting, and trash pickup.*

Fall surface greatly improved with addition of new sand. Corrosion, signage, and lack of lighting are still issues for this site.

### **Crocker Amazon Playground—Geneva (D to B)**

*Workday on November 8, 2008. Tasks completed: new sand added to boat sand feature. RPD improvement identified by Parkscan.org: repair of hole in plexiglass play equipment, graffiti removal.*

Rubber surface is very hard and is worn and discolored. Some equipment fasteners are cracked and not secure. Discoloration and graffiti is a reoccurring problem on plexiglass.

### **Herz (D to D)**

*Workday on November 22, 2008. Tasks completed: sand sifting, trash pickup and weeding.*

Rubber surface is uneven, climbing net is worn, surface has foreign objects like pine needles and rocks but no hazardous materials. There are also corroded bolts and incomplete signage.

### **Joe DiMaggio Playground (D to B)**

*Workday on August 16, 2008. Tasks completed: weeding, sand installation, sand sifting, and trash pickup.*

Play equipment is old and metal pieces have a lot of corrosion; however, the wooden elements have been recently painted and the sand remains clean after Playground Initiative workday and a monthly workday hosted by the Friends of Joe DiMaggio. Structures are sturdy.

### **Lincoln Park Playground (F to C)**

*Workdays on July 19 & August 9, 2008. Tasks completed: wooden equipment painting, weeding, sand installation, sand sifting, and trash pickup.*

Painting improved roughness/splinters of wooden equipment and sealed in arsenic that could be in wood. Fall surface is now of sufficient depth and is clean. Metal elements are corroded. One slide is highly deteriorated at seams underneath the slide bed. Signage is incomplete and the fall zone is under six feet.

**Merced Heights Playground (D to C)**

*Workday on August 23, 2008. Tasks completed: weeding, sand installation, sand sifting, and trash pickup.*

Sand remains clean and of sufficient depth. Protruding bolts, corrosion, sinking, and splinters. Signage is incomplete and the fall zone is under six feet.

**Silver Terrace Playground (D to D)**

*Workday on October 25, 2008. Tasks completed: weeding, sand sifting, and trash pickup.*

Sand remains fairly clean and equipment is sturdy. Benches/wood structures seem to have been painted since first assessment. Signage is incomplete and the fall zone is under six feet. No trash cans or lighting, poor visual perimeter as well. Corrosion and one slide has a broken rail end.

**Sunset Playground (F to C)**

*Workday completed on October 18, 2008. Tasks completed: weeding, planting, sand installation, sand sifting, and trash pickup.*

Sand remains deep and clean and equipment is sturdy. Benches/wood structures seem to have been painted since first assessment. Signage is incomplete and the fall zone is under six feet. No lighting and corrosion. Outer fence broken although still shuts.

**West Sunset Playground (F to C)**

*Workday completed on October 18, 2008. Tasks completed: weeding, sand sifting, and trash pickup.*

Signage is incomplete, corrosion, some unpainted surfaces. Sand clean but compacted. Play equipment old but functional.

**Youngblood Coleman Playground (F to F)**

*Supported RPD through removal of wooden visual obstruction at playground.*

Playground has only swings and a concrete slide. Swings are corroded, do not have a six foot fall area, and their concrete footings are exposed. There is no lighting and the playground is blocked from view by many objects. No rules are posted.

**Conclusions and Next Steps**

The 2008 Playground Report Card is an invaluable tool for communicating about San Francisco playgrounds and prioritizing limited Recreation and Park Department resources. Moreover, the 2008 playground grades offer an important point-in-time snapshot of the condition of each surveyed

playground and highlight key safety and maintenance concerns. For the 2010 Playground Report Card, NPC will work with RPD to improve upon the current survey to allow for a more longitudinal look at each playground in addition to a point-in-time view.

Understanding how a playground is performing over time allows NPC to conduct informed advocacy for renovations with City entities and in conjunction with the neighbors affected. The snapshot look is useful in directing volunteers and resources in real time without the delay that fundraising and renovation require to make a play space safer.

Although many of the 26 failing playgrounds will require expensive renovations in the future, the reassessment process demonstrated how small and relatively inexpensive improvements can often upgrade the overall safety of a playground area. For example, sand sifting is one of the cheapest and simplest ways to eliminate serious hazards to children. Sifting removes hazardous debris such as broken glass and feces left in playground sand, often on a nightly basis. Since sifting should ideally occur on an as-needed basis, NPC is currently advocating to improve community access to sand sifters so that parents can immediately remove dangerous materials from playground sand as they find it. Presently, volunteer sand sifting may only occur with supervision by an RPD staff member and therefore only occurs at specially planned workdays or when RPD staff have the time to sift the sand themselves. Given the staffing shortage at RPD and the volume of sand in San Francisco's playgrounds, debris build up occurs quickly and persists unnecessarily because of limitations on volunteerism.

NPC would also like to focus on the replacement of basic equipment such as new chains and swing seats. While it is not possible to eliminate all corrosion from a playground in a cost-effective way, corrosion should and can be eliminated from the places that kids encounter it most such as swing chains. NPC plans to raise money in 2009 to purchase replacement swings for RPD to install at failing playgrounds.

During the 2009 phase of the Playground Initiative, NPC looks forward to continuing to work with RPD to improve conditions at the remaining 15 failed sites from 2008, and partner with the City and community groups to identify additional funding sources for basic playground improvements. NPC will also continue the practice of becoming the fiscal agent for park groups formed through the work of the Playground Initiative when the community demonstrates the desire and commitment to raise funds for a total playground renovation.

While play structures will continue to wear overtime, NPC hopes that the 2010 Playground Report Card will have fewer failing structures as the result of more frequent attention to playground safety, inspired by the 2008 grading process.