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## Bethlehem schools plan to level playing field at recess

### Elementary schools to get equipment in the order it's most needed.

By [Adam Clark](#), Of The Morning Call

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Bethlehem Area School District is planning to upgrade its worst playgrounds in an effort to level the playing field at elementary school recess.

The district has long relied on schools' PTAs to fund playground equipment and repairs, leaving Fountain Hill and William Penn elementary schools with no playground at all. Meanwhile, Hanover Elementary has so much equipment that even its largest grade of students doesn't fill it, according to a district analysis.

The plan outlined at Monday's school board Facilities Committee meeting calls for the district to fund enough equipment that 50 percent of the largest grade at each elementary school would have somewhere to play. Using that figure, only four elementary schools would qualify for an immediate district contribution.

One of those schools' PTA, William Penn, has already raised funds for a new playground. That leaves Fountain Hill, Miller Heights and Freemansburg as the top priorities.

The district annually inspects playgrounds to determine if they are in acceptable condition, and Fountain Hill's old playground is condemned.

Fountain Hill has been trying to raise money and is hoping to secure a grant, and Miller Heights is also in the process of raising money, so it's possible neither school would need the district contribution this year, Director of Facilities and Operations Mark Stein said.

Once the district identifies which school needs new equipment, installation will start this summer as long as it's approved in the 2013-14 budget, Stein said. The district plans to spend on one playground per summer in each following year.

Playground equipment costs about \$1,000 per student it can support, so Fountain Hill's playground would cost about \$50,000 to meet to the minimum demand. Miller Heights' playground improvements would cost \$30,500 and Freemansburg needs \$14,500, according to the district.

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Ensuring each school has a playground is a matter of equity, Superintendent Joseph Roy said. Bethlehem has had inconsistency in its policy in the past, with the district sometimes paying for playgrounds when new schools were built while not replacing obsolete playgrounds at other schools.

Several district playgrounds are more than 10 years old and the average piece of equipment lasts about 15 years, Stein said. With the district contributing to the cost of repairs and new equipment, the PTAs can focus on raising money for field trips, assemblies and other education opportunities, he said.

The upgraded playgrounds will be a service to the community, School Director Irene Follweiler said.

"It is very, very low cost for the amount of years that it will last," Follweiler said. "And it's something the community enjoys all the time."

Director Sudantha Vidanage said playgrounds and recess promote teamwork among students.

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