

Playground Safety - Watch Out Mulch !

Portsmouth Public Schools in Portsmouth, Va
By Kellye Whitney

Imagine little bodies hurtling back and forth on swings. Tiny legs churn and then dig into the earth upon stopping and starting, and eventually a hole forms.

Similar holes are regularly filled in with mulch to cushion those little bodies should one fall down, and while the constant raking and replacement of mulch has worked well for the professionals in charge of playground maintenance for the Portsmouth School District, which serves more than 15,000 students in the Hampton Roads region of Virginia, a new solution was welcome.

That solution, a WoodCarpet wear mat, came in September 2009 in the form of a gift from Zeager Brothers Playground Surfacing.

Caprice White, a construction contract specialist at Portsmouth Public Schools, said the company offered the district a test-drive to see if they liked the product and then showed employees how to install the mats. White said installation was fairly simple—securing the mats beneath each swing or sliding board and then raking in mulch to cover it—and took about 20 minutes per mat. The first school to act as guinea pig was Park View Elementary School in Portsmouth, which had just installed a brand-new playground.

"Basically, kids drag their feet underneath the swings, and it digs the dirt and causes like a hole there," White said. "Now, underneath the swings there's a mat. The wear mat prevents that hole and keeps the ground level, so if the child was to fall right there it gives them cushion."

White said so far the mats are working out well, and if at the end of the probationary period the mats are still satisfactory, Portsmouth plans to install the wear mats for all of its 18 Pre-K center and elementary school playgrounds.

It goes without saying that a playground is a high-traffic area. Monday through Friday multiple classes from each grade level make their way outside for recess at least once per day. The playgrounds are also open to the surrounding communities on the weekends and during non-school hours.

Portsmouth Director of Operations Nita Mensia-Joseph estimates using the wear mats will save the school district a month of labor annually, as it will no longer be necessary to continuously rake in mulch from other areas of the playground to refill the holes that appear beneath the swings and sliding boards.

"We go out and rake every couple of months to keep [the mulch] level and maintain playground safety," she explained. "On a quarterly basis it would take a person maybe four man hours depending upon the playground. Some of them are very large, and they're also used by the community, it's not just for school. We would save one week's worth of time every quarter. We could actually redirect a person for one month, about 120 to 160 man hours is what we would save annually."

If the wear mats—which cost about \$100 a piece—are used across the school district there likely will be significant cost savings as well. Until now, Mensia-Joseph said the district was unaware of any cost effective alternatives to mulch.

"We've tried a different border, but we have not tried alternative playground covering. There's a rubber covering that was way too expensive. It was beyond what we could afford to do," she said. "So, mulch was the most cost-effective way of ensuring playground safety."



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She agreed that so far the mats seem to be working out. There have not been any complaints from Park View Elementary School, nor have there been any accidents reported.

"We chose this particular playground because it was brand-new, just installed, and the mulch was brand-new, so we had a very good reference point to how the wear mats would perform over the course of the year. We would be able to compare it to new mulch and other playgrounds in terms of safety.

"If this could help us out it would hopefully prevent us from having to remulch those areas on an annual basis, and we could get away with maybe three or four years before we had to provide additional mulch," she said.

Mulch expenses depend on the playground—and Portsmouth School District playgrounds vary in size—but Mensia-Joseph said the district probably spends about \$10,000 every 18 months to two years to keep playground mulch fresh.

"That can go from \$2,000 to \$10,000 depending upon the school. Our mulch bill runs about \$50,000 every two years," she said. "We would look at that being about \$50,000 every four years, so it would cut our mulch costs between 30 and 50 percent."

The annual return on the initial investment wouldn't be too shabby. Couple the cost savings with the safety of the mulch alternative, and the mats have been qualified as a tentative success.

"If we were doing some sort of statistical analysis I would say there is no significant difference between the mats and a properly mulched playground," Mensia-Joseph said. "A lot of districts have difficulty maintaining the proper level of mulch on a consistent basis. That's where the safety improvement comes in. You will consistently have the right height underneath the swing or the playground."

~ The End ~

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Zeager Bros. Inc.: www.zeager.com

