



Learning center to offer day-care participants outdoor experience

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Author Rick Wills

It won't be jungle gyms or swing sets.

Instead, the **Butler County Community College's** new outdoor learning center will give youngsters in the school's day-care program, called the Children's Creative Learning Center, a chance to grow things and experience the outdoors.

"We wanted to create a space where children are free to dig up worms, splash in water and watch birds and clouds," said Judy Zuzack, the center's director.

The area has space for hill climbing, with a slide embedded into the hill, and a music and movement section that has a pagoda bell.

Work on the outdoor learning center started in July and will be finished by the start of the school's fall semester in late August, school officials said.

"We saw the opportunity to move away from the norm, not the usual asphalt and large climbing structure playground," Zuzack said.

Zuzack and school officials want the learning center to be certified by the Nature Explore Classroom Certification Program, run by the Nebraska-based Arbor Day and Dimensions foundations.

"This is learning that takes place at a different level. Research over a decade says children are staying inside too much. These spaces are building the future stewards of the earth," said Lana Gilson, outreach coordinator for Nature Explore.

The initiative recognizes schools and other organizations that have made a commitment to providing outdoor classrooms and comprehensive programming to help children use the natural world as a part of learning, said Susan Chagnon, school spokeswoman.

Certified outdoor centers in Western Pennsylvania are located at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, the Fern Hollow Nature Center in Sewickley and at Winnie Palmer Nature Reserve at Saint Vincent College near Latrobe.

About 35 preschool-age children of staff and students attend day care at the school, Chagnon said.

“It’s a new environment for children. It’s something different than video games and computers,” Chagnon said.

The outdoor learning center will cost \$100,000. According to the school, \$25,000 was donated by the Alcoa Foundation. Foundation officials did not respond to requests for comment.