

Swinging a new school playground

Oak Cliff: St. Elizabeth students take fund drive and run with it

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By **BETH FREED** / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Fourth-graders at St. Elizabeth Catholic School were ecstatic last year when school officials announced the annual development drive. A two-prong plan proclaimed the goals of new carpeting for the Oak Cliff school along with a new playground.

In the kids' minds, the late-'80s playground was due for an overhaul at the 48-year-old parochial school.

But when carpeting took the clear lead over the playground for funds, students got fed up. They pooled their loose change to raise \$50 for the new playground. They then presented the jar to principal Christina Clem for safekeeping.

"They had such a passion," said fourth-grade teacher Kristy Feil. "I thought, we need to take this to the next level."

Together with Elizabeth Belew, development director for St. Elizabeth, last year's fourth-grade class, Ms. Feil and Ms. Clem created Saints Rally for Recess. The student committee has liaisons who meet with parents and administrators to tally up the needs and discuss different fundraising strategies.

"These are going to be very successful kids," said Ms. Belew. "It meant so much to them that they took the initiative."

Last year, they raised nearly \$8,000 toward their ultimate goal of \$50,000. In addition to traditional fundraisers such as candy and T-shirt sales and car washes, the youngsters – now fifth-graders – are seeking business sponsorships of the playground. Those will be commemorated with plaques of recognition.

"We wanted a new playground for everyone, so we just started to raise money," said fifth-grader Hannah Velez, president of Saints Rally for Recess. She said she looks forward to the monkey bars on the new playground.

Erica Aranda has two children at St. Elizabeth's who are heavily invested in the new playground. Caity, a fourth-grader, and Emily, a kindergartener, will benefit for years from the new development.

"There's just not enough room for them," Ms. Aranda said of the multiple classes that use the playground at once. "They know it's going to benefit everybody."

The kids have added planning input as well. Students helped approve the final design for the playground. It will be near a baseball field, surrounded by grassy fields and shady trees.

"The new location is safer and aesthetically pleasing," Ms. Clem said.

The group hopes to know by January whether it has the funds to build the playground by spring break.

"I think this is about ownership," Ms. Feil said of her former students' tenacity. "They started it all, and it's very personal to them."

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Photos by MELANIE BURFORD/DMN

Sasha Cox, 10 (left), pushes Kayla Feaster, 10, on the swings of the St. Elizabeth Catholic School playground, last renovated in the 1980s. Fifth-graders are determined to reach their \$50,000 fundraising goal for a first-class play space.