



Play It Forward

The Somerset Elementary Field Campaign

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is “Play It Forward?”

A. “Play It Forward” is a one-year community campaign to raise money to renovate the Somerset field, replacing the current packed dirt with synthetic turf and organic, plant-based infill. The name comes from the fact that a renovated field will be an investment in our children’s healthy development by allowing them to play outside. What we build today will benefit students and the surrounding community for years to come.

Q. What’s wrong with the current field?

A. It is unsafe and often simply unusable: grass cannot grow on the field, and the packed-dirt surface is uneven and virtually impermeable, causing water and dirt to run off to the street below. The packed dirt creates dust storms when the wind blows and turns to mud when it rains, putting the field out of use for days. By contrast, synthetic turf is always ready for play.

Q. How does it affect the students?

A. Our children don’t have regular outdoor exercise time because the field is often too muddy or too dusty. After a rainstorm, it stays muddy for three to four days. This requires the students to have “blacktop only” recess where active play is restricted, or indoor recess in their classroom. In 2015, the students lost approximately 30 days of outside recess on days that would have been suitable for outdoor play had the field been in adequate condition.

Q. Why can’t grass grow on the field?

A. We have the smallest plot of land of any Montgomery County school. The number of children using the field and the soil makeup prevent grass from growing. MCPS has put down sod twice since 2005, at a cost of \$50,000–\$60,000 each time. Re-seeding was attempted in 2010, closing down the field for most of the school year. Each time, grass has not been able to survive beyond a few months.

Q. How does the field affect our kids and their teachers?

A. Our kids injure themselves on the uneven surface and allergies are exacerbated due to dust inhalation. Para-educators supervising recess have worn face masks to protect themselves. Outdoor lineup and recess are frequently cancelled, which means our kids are unable to exercise and benefit from daily physical activity during the school day. This, in turn, affects their behavior and learning in class.

Q. How much does a new field cost?

A. The estimate given by MCPS Facilities is \$550,000. The breakdown is \$175K-\$225K for the turf, \$150K for stormwater management, \$40K for a concrete curb, \$60K for design and engineering, which equals \$480,000, plus a 15 percent contingency. Total field size: 26,088 sq ft.

Q. Why can’t MCPS pay for this?

A. While MCPS should be held responsible for the safety and well-being of its schoolchildren, the reality is that the school system is faced with massive overcrowding right now, as well as a budget shortfall. No other elementary school has a turf field. The high school turf fields have all been paid for privately.

Q. Isn't synthetic turf harmful to our children's health?

A. There was negative press and legitimate concern about the potential health risks of crumb-rubber infill made from recycled tires that is used in many turf fields. But those concerns don't apply to the field we're looking at for Somerset. MCPS adopted a policy to use only plant-derived infill for turf fields going forward. Plant-derived infill has the added benefit of remaining cooler on hot days than crumb-rubber infill.

Q. How do injury rates compare on turf fields versus grass?

A. Most studies show no difference in injury rates. For example, a 2014 study of professional soccer players who played equal time on synthetic turf and natural grass showed no difference in their injury rates. Our current field is full of undulations and divots, which lead to injuries. Turf has the advantage of a uniform and consistent surface.

Q. How does synthetic turf impact the environment?

A. A turf field does not need to be watered, mowed or fertilized. In addition, a new stormwater management system (in compliance with more stringent 2008 County regulations) will be installed that will reduce water runoff from the field.

Q. What about annual maintenance?

A. Annual maintenance on a field this size is estimated to run between \$3,000 and \$4,000. The Somerset Foundation and PTA are committing their resources to cover this annual cost.

Q. What happens when the turf needs to be replaced?

A. The synthetic turf "carpet" generally needs to be replaced every 10 years (variable due to usage and other factors). As this is County property, MCPS is responsible for replacing the turf. The drainage layer remains through 3-4 turf replacements.

Q: \$550,000 is a lot of money. Couldn't we spend that money on hiring more teachers and making class sizes smaller?

A. MCPS does NOT allow Foundations, Booster Clubs, or PTAs to fundraise for additional MCPS personnel. The Foundation and PTA are committed to working with our Cluster Rep and our school leadership to voice our concerns to MCPS and the Board of Education about Somerset's growing class sizes. The Foundation and PTA are also committed to continuing their annual contributions to school needs, while leading the "Play it Forward" campaign.

Q: What sort of support does this initiative have from the school faculty and school community?

A. Ask any of your teachers! Principal Morris, P.E. teacher Richard House, and every teacher we have spoken to has expressed hope that we can finally do something about the field. Parent Allison Mistrett, an occupational therapist, says a new field is critical in order to enable outdoor play, which is "an outlet for energy and provides children with the input they need to attend to classroom activities. Not to mention, it develops a variety of skills that are essential for learning including: bilateral coordination, eye-hand coordination, motor planning, and socialization."

Q: How can I help the "Play it Forward" campaign?

A: You may donate to the campaign through the Somerset Foundation, either with a check made out to the Somerset Foundation, or online at www.somerset-foundation.org. You may also volunteer to host a fundraising party, help with campaign outreach, contact local businesses, ask if your employer offers a matching grant, or come up with your own way to help make this dream a reality! Please contact Katherine Coleman katherine.s.coleman@gmail.com, Caroline Cooper caroline.n.cooper@gmail.com, or Erica Brown ericatuttle@hotmail.com if you would like to help.

