

# Kids' Planet... with Thorne Nature Experience



Drawing by Kara Priest

## GREEN SCHOOLYARDS

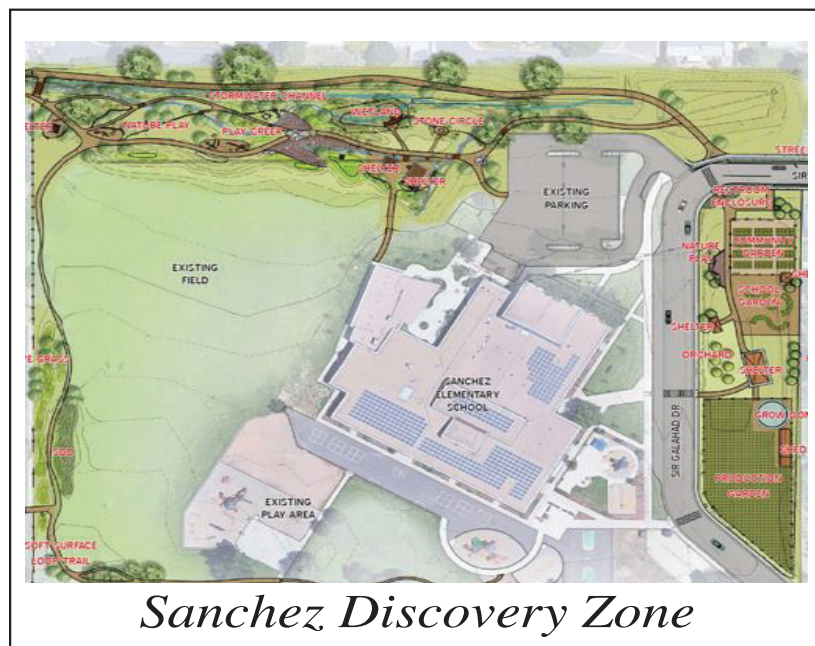


by Dr. Oakleigh Thorne, II

**G**reen schoolyards are ones that offer places for students, teachers, parents, and community members to have contact with nature! They provide a place for them to play, learn, explore, and grow in an area where the natural world has conscientiously been an integral part of the design.

This, by the way, is called *Biophilic Design* because the concept of Biophilia, of which I have previously written, implies that we as humans are more psychologically healthy when we have contact with nature.

Green schoolyards usually have trees, shrubs, or other plants, which can include native gardens, vegetable gardens, trails, and nature play areas. They are often called outdoor classrooms. They encourage an increase in physical activity and beneficial nature play, which in turn have mental health benefits that relate to improved academic outcomes. For example, studies have shown that high school students who had views of trees from their classrooms had higher standardized test scores and higher graduation rates. This also resulted in a greater percentage of students planning to attend a four-year college.



*Sanchez Discovery Zone*

Green schoolyards are havens from stress and promote academic achievement through hands-on, experiential learning in many subject areas, including science, math, and language arts. These green areas help students to more easily focus their attention and, therefore, have better control over their behavior. This positively enhances their attitudes toward and engagement with their school. Furthermore, green schoolyards help support creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and imagination. This strengthens the links between free play and learning.

Green schoolyards encourage different types of cooperative free play. Dramatic play, for example, utilizes loose parts such as sticks, stones, acorns, and pine cones, which engages the imagination of the students. Exploratory play in nature gives opportunities for children to explore their surroundings. Solitary play allows children to engage in alone, contemplative time finding their very own

spot under a bush or behind a rock, or their own special nook. As a boy playing in the woods, I remember that I had such a secret place of my own. Constructive play allows children to build things out of natural materials, such as their very own fort or shelter. Finally, locomotive play may entail balancing on a stump or walking along a fallen log or just running and jumping over various objects.

A good example of an excellent green schoolyard is the new Sanchez Discovery Zone, created by a partnership between the Boulder Valley School District and the City of Lafayette. It has just been added to Sanchez Elementary School. This is part of a major grant from Great Outdoors Colorado (GO-CO) Generation Wild that was made to a coalition of environmental educators in Boulder County called Nature Kids/Jovenes de la Naturaleza. This program has been spearheaded by Keith Desrosiers, the executive director at Thorne Nature Experience.

Green schoolyards can accommodate different ages and abilities of the students and hold their attention by offering a variety of options that appeal to a wide range of interests. Free play has been shown to promote cooperation and the spirit of negotiation among a group of children. Meaningful outdoor experiences in nature help children to develop a love of and caring for nature and the Earth, while supporting the children's healthy development.

Green schoolyards help develop social/emotional skills. For example, kids feel calmer and less stressed, positive and restored (less negative emotions), and more resilient (with feelings of competence and better social relationships, including more cooperative play and civil behavior).

Most of the research about green schoolyards has been provided by the *Children & Nature Network*, which is available on-line. I am proud to say that Boulder County has become one of the national leaders in this area!

*Dr. Thorne is founder and honorary president of Thorne Nature Experience (formerly Thorne Ecological Institute), a nonprofit organization headquartered in Boulder. For 65 years they have helped "connect youth to nature!" For information about their programs, please check their website at [www.thornenature.org](http://www.thornenature.org) or email [info@thornenature.org](mailto:info@thornenature.org) or call (303) 499-3647, ext. 100.*

