



TRENDS & INSIGHTS

How to choose and install playground equipment

Experience
+ Positive.



Playgrounds shape more than play – they build connection, confidence, and creativity.

We all remember the “great playground” of our childhood – where we made our first friends, exercised our imaginations, and tested our limits.

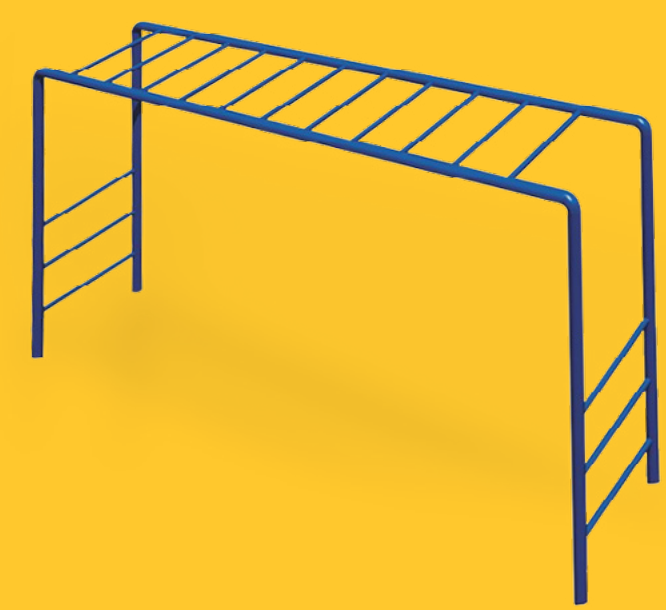
Today, screens compete for kids’ attention like never before, but outdoor play is still essential! It supports small and large motor development, socialization, and imaginative thinking – School Outfitters helps create playgrounds that give your students the same lifelong benefits we had, and more.

This guide walks you through the process of planning and installing a playground – learn what to consider at every step of your project.



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Raise the **monkey** bar

In completing a playground project, you gift years of fun and skill-building play to the kids in your community. The American Academy of Pediatrics advocates for daily play for growing bodies and cites four key benefits to playing outside.

SOURCE – HEALTHYCHILDREN.ORG



PHYSICAL HEALTH

More outdoor time is linked with improved motor development and lower obesity rates and myopia risk.



ENGAGED LEARNING

Studies have found that children who spent more time in nature exploration had improved learning outcomes.



BEHAVIOR

Research shows that when children spent time in natural settings they had less anger and aggression. Impulse control also improves.



MENTAL HEALTH

Stress and depression are lower for all people who spend time in nature. Children show increased focus and reduced symptoms of ADHD.

DEFINING NEEDS

Where planning begins.

You have identified a need for your institution and have at least preliminary approval to research and develop a vision, timeline, and costs. This is the exploration and imagination phase, where everything is possible, but nothing is certain. The goal is to understand all the main factors so that you can start to finalize your vision for success. Start with five basic questions:

- What is my budget and how much will this project cost?
- What are the ages, numbers, and special needs of the children who will use the space?
- What equipment is age and need-appropriate for my students?
- What can my space accommodate?
- When does this project need to be completed?

You don’t have to finalize your answers yet, get into a ballpark to explore solutions and keep the project on schedule.



Norwood
Round Picnic Table
NOR-NW105-RNDD



Ultra Play Systems
Deer Creek Play System
UTP-UPLAY-002-P



Lifetime Products
Ace Flyer Teeter Totter Activity Center
LIF-151110

DEFINING NEEDS

Sizing your playground
(and your budget).

The more students and age groups you need to serve, the more space (and investment) your playground will require.

Start by understanding your available footprint – length, width, and any height limitations. In tighter spaces, like urban campuses, that may mean getting creative with rooftops, underused areas, or even building upward with multi-level structures.

Most projects fall into three general cost ranges based on size.



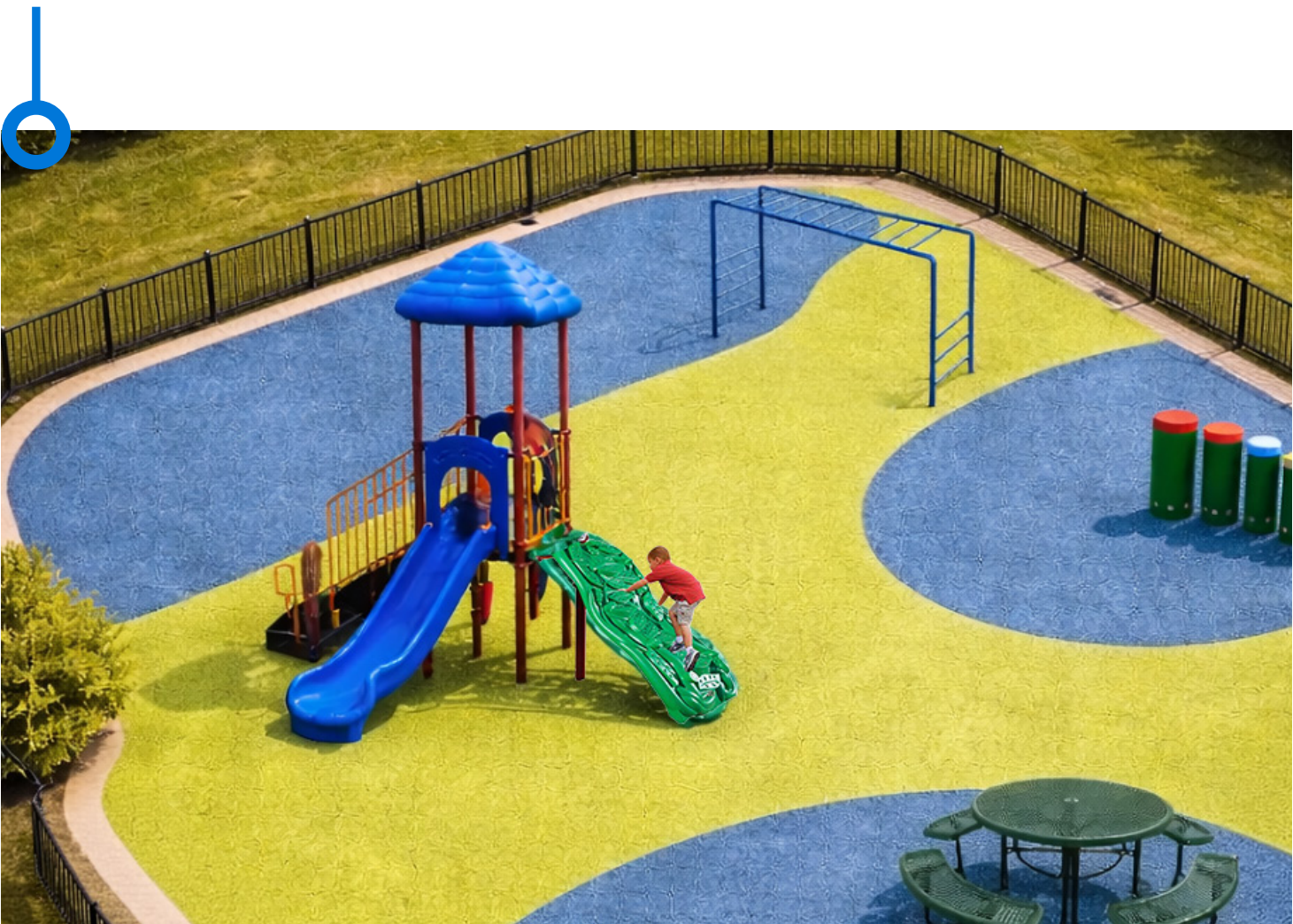
Ready to start planning?

Playground projects have a lot of moving parts. Talk to one of our outdoor experts today and request a free playground design to see how you can make the most of your space.

SMALL

Under 1,000 square feet

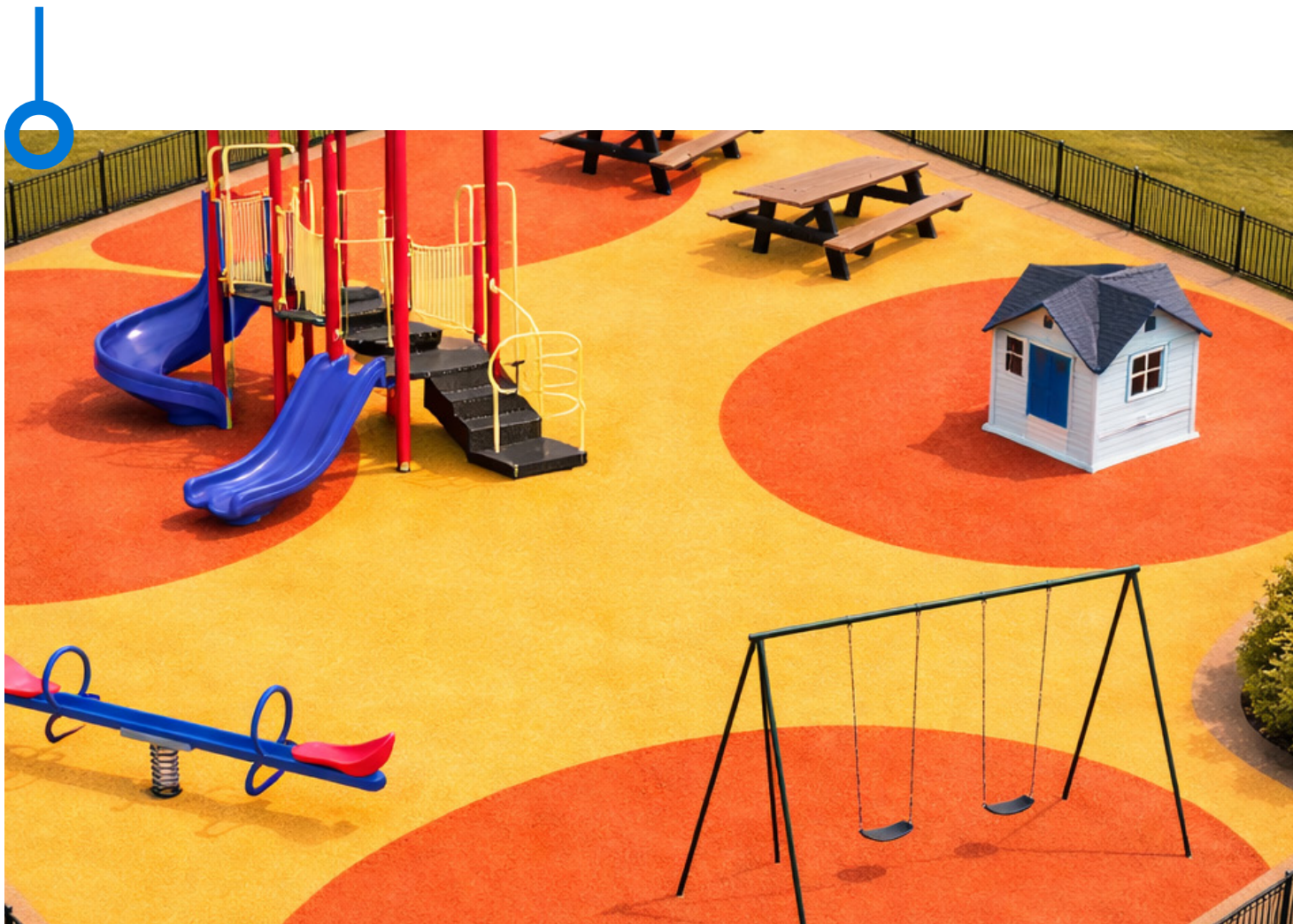
\$10,000 to \$25,000



MEDIUM

1,000 - 2,000 square feet

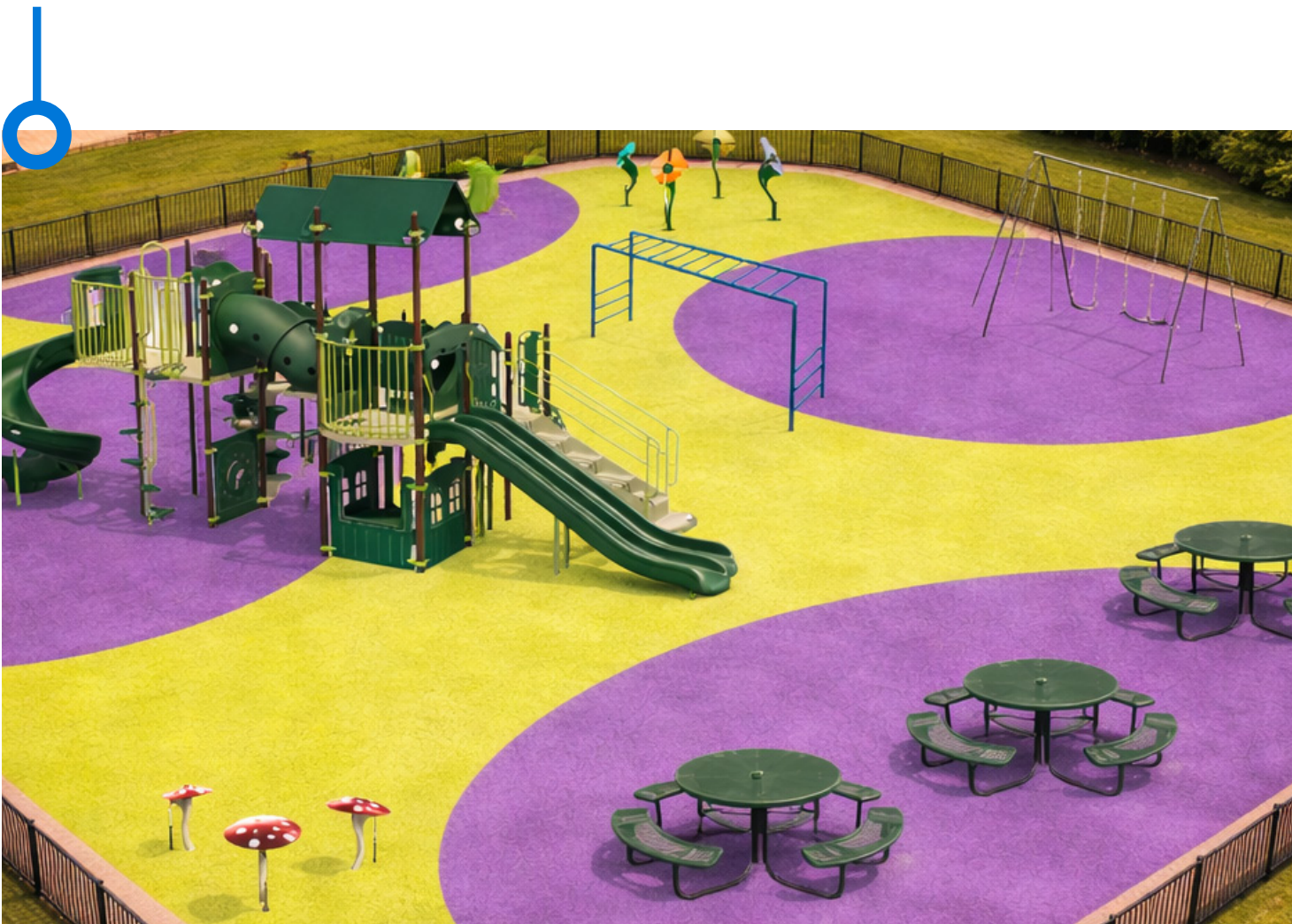
\$25,000 to \$ 60,000



LARGE

2,500 - 5,000 square feet

\$60,000 to \$ 150,000+

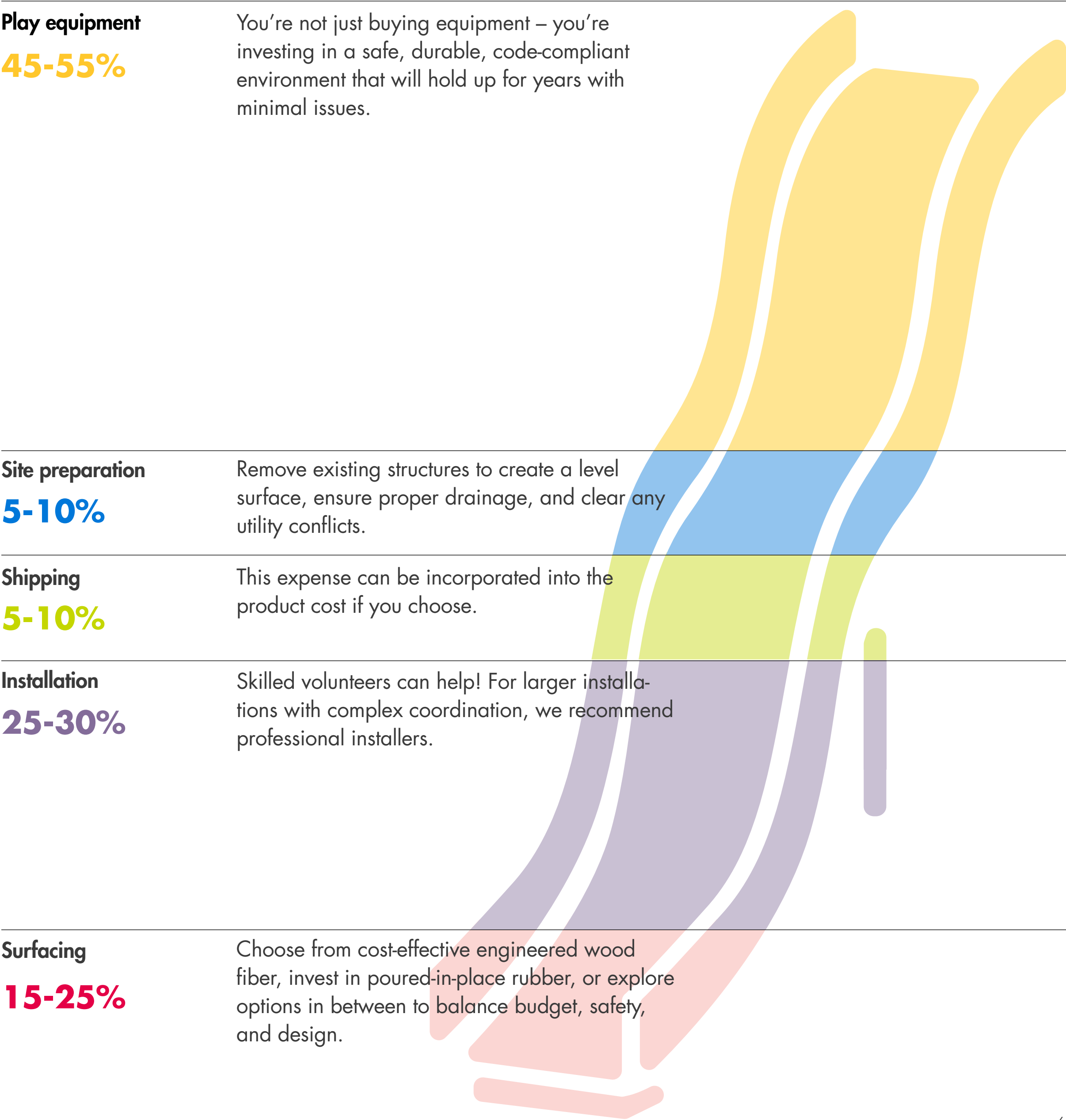


These renderings are intended to illustrate general layout and possibilities. Final designs, dimensions, and product configurations will vary based on your space and project needs.

DEFINING NEEDS

What factors into cost?

Playground costs are typically made up of five key components: the equipment itself, site preparation to ensure a safe foundation, protective surfacing, shipping and logistics, and professional installation. Understanding how each factor contributes helps you plan more accurately and make informed decisions based on your priorities and budget.



DEFINING NEEDS

Student Demographics

There are three main age groups to consider when planning a playground – Infant to toddler, early elementary, and late elementary. Get a rough count by age – how many children will be on playground equipment at peak times?

Playgrounds need to accommodate all ages and abilities. You can create an inclusive outdoor space by offering areas of play for different ages with buffer zones to ensure older kids do not knock down smaller ones.

ADA-accessible equipment is a legally required part of playground design. If a larger percentage of your kids have special needs due to mental or physical factors, you can add more inclusive play options to support them.



Don't forget the adults!

Teachers, parents, and caregivers need comfortable places to sit and clear sight-lines to supervise. In parks, there may be one adult for every two children – plan for enough benches and tables to support them.



UNDER 2 YEARS
Infant to toddler

Choose movable small slides, soft mats, and experiential walls that can be used either outdoors or indoors for young crawlers and new walkers. Mounting is typically not required.

Heavy adult supervision.



2-5 YEARS
Early elementary

Look for low-to-ground-installed outdoor equipment that is sized to smaller bodies and presents achievable physical challenges developed according to their abilities.

Moderate adult supervision.



5-12 YEARS
Late elementary

Focus on larger equipment with steeper slides, more climbing, and large motor options that are within a child's ability level, but rigorous enough to condition muscles. Leave more space for unstructured play and games with balls.

Light adult supervision.

DEFINING NEEDS

When will my playground open?

Playground projects install over the spring and summer. To allow for any potential delays, we like to reserve one month for planning, one month for manufacturing and one month for install. This means if you start planning March 1 and purchase by April 1, you can have equipment delivered by the start of May and full install by early June.



In a rush?

We can move fast. Save time on your project with equipment options that can ship in 7 business days.

We can complete projects in 4-5 weeks.





It's often essential for you to know how life will improve for students once they have a new playground. Chief among these benefits is the development of "Fundamental Movement Skills," as described in this Danish study published on the National Institute of Health website. The study details the importance of Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) in child development: sitting, standing, balancing, running, jumping, climbing, and object control, among others. The study also points out that kids in the developed world get less time to do these activities than they should.

Molly Sokolis PT, DPT, a Doctor of Physical Therapy at St. Louis Children's Hospital, shares additional benefits. These include health advantages from vestibular input (swinging and sliding) to whole-body workouts (climbing walls.)

GOALS & BUY-IN

What are our goals for the new playground?



PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Improve strength, balance, coordination, body awareness, spatial recognition, fine and gross motor skills, agility, hand-eye coordination, and cardiovascular health.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Enhance creativity, problem-solving, decision making, focus, memory, and attention.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Encourages communication, sharing, vocabulary, conversation skills, and collaboration when doing creative play.

SENSORY DEVELOPMENT

Improving the vestibular system controls balance and coordination, multi-sensory engagement works toward brain development.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Cooperation, conflict resolution, sharing, taking turns, self-confidence, and self-esteem.

CLASSROOM LESSON INTEGRATION

If you choose, you can reinforce classroom learning objectives with play.

GOALS & BUY-IN

Who are our champions?

People support what they help to create. Whether public or private, you want your school stakeholders to feel invested in the solution you're proposing. The best way to do that is to involve them in planning.

Consider these stakeholder groups:

- Your board or controlling government
- Your supervisor
- Your colleagues who will send kids to the playground
- Parents and community members who will use or endorse the project
- Community groups and local elected officials
- Your students

What would you need to see on opening day to tell your friends and colleagues that this playground project was a success?

You'll hear everything from broad vision to specific wish lists, and that's a good thing! Before you commit budget, get your team aligned on what success looks like – turn feedback into a brief project summary that states your goals, share it with stakeholders, and ask for their support. When you come back with a final plan, you'll already have buy-in.

PRODUCT SELECTION

What playground equipment is right for my needs?

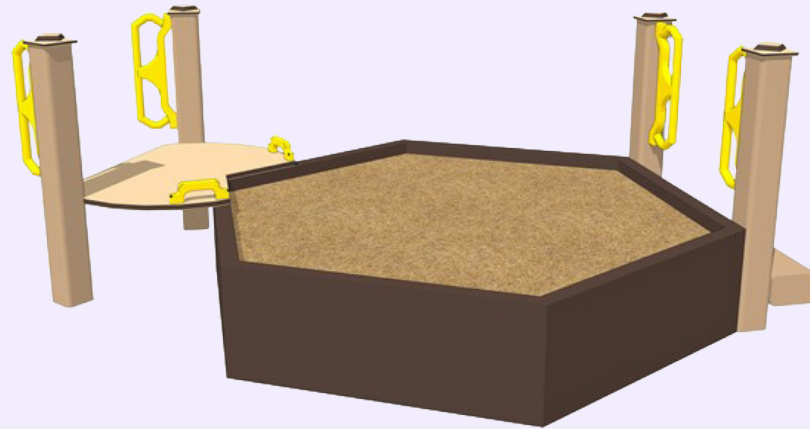
Investigate playground equipment options. You don’t need to finalize every detail yet—this is about understanding your options. Many manufacturers offer preconfigured systems that combine different play types and activity zones. These can be a helpful starting point to show how equipment works together to engage students and meet safety standards.

Review these packages to see what aligns with your goals, then adjust as needed—swapping elements or exploring custom solutions. As you evaluate options, think beyond the equipment itself. Consider how each piece supports physical activity, cognitive development, and social interaction, helping you create a space that truly works for your students.



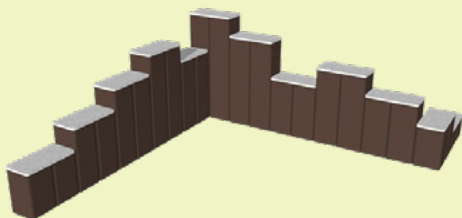
Swings

Improve balance, coordination, and fine and gross motor skills.



Sandboxes

Sandboxes can drive imaginative play and tactile exploration.



Climbing structures

Climbing structures support upper- and lower-body strength, coordination, risk assessment, and problem solving.



Slides

Straight, spiral, and wavy slides improve balance, coordination, and motor skills.



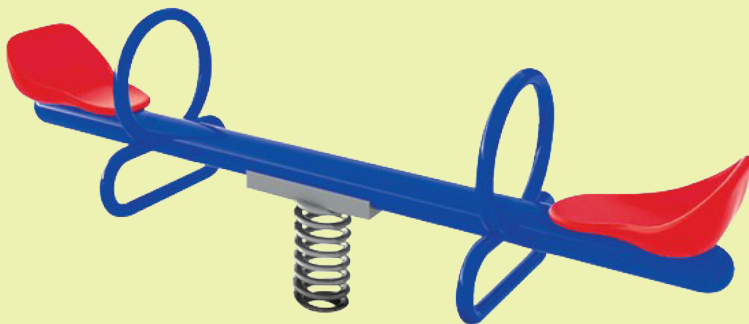
Interactive, sensory, and music play elements

General learning, experimentation, tactile exploration, self-led exploration, cooperative play.



Shade structures

Keep students safe from the sun’s rays and incimate weather.



Seesaws

Improve balance, spatial awareness, and communication and lead to an understanding of cause and effect.



Merry-go-rounds

Great for communal play, supports balance, and collaboration to create motion.



PLAYGROUND DESIGN

A checklist for planning your playground.

You’ll want a playground layout that engages learners every day, and your greatest feedback will come from how students use the space. This checklist covers common considerations.

Do we have zones for different ages and activities?	Are we incorporating trees and other natural landmarks?
Do we have a mix of active play areas and passive?	Do we have all safety and ADA issues accounted for?
Is there a flow to the zones and activities?	Will this layout handle all kids at full capacity?
Do we have space for both structured and imaginative play?	Does this have the outdoor storage we need?
Are there quiet areas and hideaway elements?	Do we have benches and tables for adults to sit and observe?
Will this space accommodate ball play/sports for older students?	Who is landscaping around the playground?
Will this space delight all age and ability groups?	Do we have adequate shade and protection from the weather?
Is the space challenging but not overwhelming?	What ongoing maintenance is needed, and can we do it easily with current staff?
Is the space fun and inviting?	Are all drainage issues considered?
What is the theme of the playground area?	Are the access points to the playground controlled?
Are we integrating with the surrounding area?	

SAFETY & COMPLIANCE

Safety and compliance standards to know.

Beyond local building codes, the main safety and compliance standards you must be aware of come from four entities:

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM)
- Consumer Product Safety Commission
- International Play Equipment Manufacturer’s Association (IMPEMA).

The good news is that reputable playground equipment manufacturers already know the standards for safety, materials, and longevity.

Manufacturers will finalize all the layouts and equipment in your quote and check to guarantee that they are offering certified products that meet these standards. You can take those plans to your local building permit office as well.



The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 require that all new play structures be accessible to those with disabilities.



The American Society for Testing and Materials provides global playground equipment standards for over 160 participating countries .



The Consumer Product Safety Commission publishes safety standards for playgrounds. Learn more in the Public Playground Safety handbook.

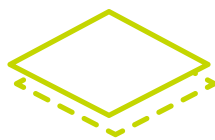


The International Play Equipment Manufacturer’s Association creates certifications for products that meet the ASTM standards for product safety.



SAFETY & COMPLIANCE

Build a compliant playground with these elements.



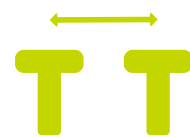
SAFE SURFACES

- Impact-absorbing materials to prevent head injuries.
- Extended surfaces six feet beyond the playground equipment itself.



ACCESSIBILITY

- Wheelchair maneuverability in and around the structures – 60” minimum.
- Ramps for access.
- Equipment for those with special needs.



SPACING

- Equipment at least nine feet apart if more than 30” high.
- Buffer zones, separated by age, to protect children under five and two.



CLEAR VISIBILITY

- Signage to guide visitors.
- Sight lines that allow caregivers and parents to observe the children.

SAFETY & COMPLIANCE

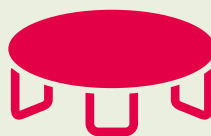
 **Safety first!**
Avoid these potential hazards.



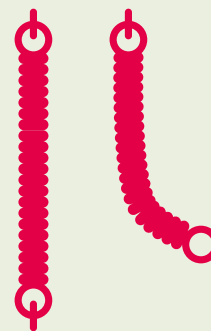
PROTRUDING BOLTS



HOOKS



TRAMPOLINES



**CLIMBING ROPES NOT
SECURED AT BOTH ENDS**



**POTENTIAL HEAD
ENTRAPMENTS**



HAZARDOUS EQUIPMENT



SWINGING GATES

BUDGET & FUNDING

Funding your new playground.

When your budget is set, you will need to confirm the funding for it. Financing and monthly payments are two options that most partners can arrange. If that is not feasible, you need to look for grants and donations. If you apply for grants, it will increase the planning time you need. Applications are usually annual and require waiting if you miss the window. There are four main sources of grants and donations.



Looking for a Grant?

Our playground partner BigToys has a comprehensive list of grant options.

Grants for Your Elementary School Playground



Government

Federal, state, local, and municipal governments often have programs to build playgrounds, particularly in low-income areas. Check with your local governments.



Foundations

Many foundations and organizations, like the Aegon Transamerica Foundation, have been created over the last 100 years to give grants for kids and playgrounds.



Industry Groups and Businesses

Local sports teams often have grants for fields and equipment. Industry groups and businesses offer grants. For instance, the American Academy of Dermatologists offers shade structure grants to prevent sun damage.



Individuals

You can conduct a local campaign in your community through churches, schools, clubs, and others. You can manage a campaign through a platform like GoFundMe.

INSTALLATION

Installing your new playground.

Average playground installation can last one to three weeks, depending on the size of the project, surfacing needs, and inclimate weather that can slow work. We’ve outlined some common issues your project manager can help you navigate as you begin your playground installation.



Site Prep

- Approve site access
- Remove existing structures or surfaces
- Grade and level site
- Address drainage patterns
- Identify utilities to be moved or avoided
- Preserve natural features



Surface Installation

- Prepare the ground to be surfaced
- Install the surface
- Curation of the surface
(for rubber or other treated products)



Equipment Installation

- Ensure delivery and staging of the unassembled equipment
- Set posts in concrete to anchor equipment
- Assembly
- Cleanup of debris
- Transfer spare parts or instructions to customer ownership



Inspection & Approval

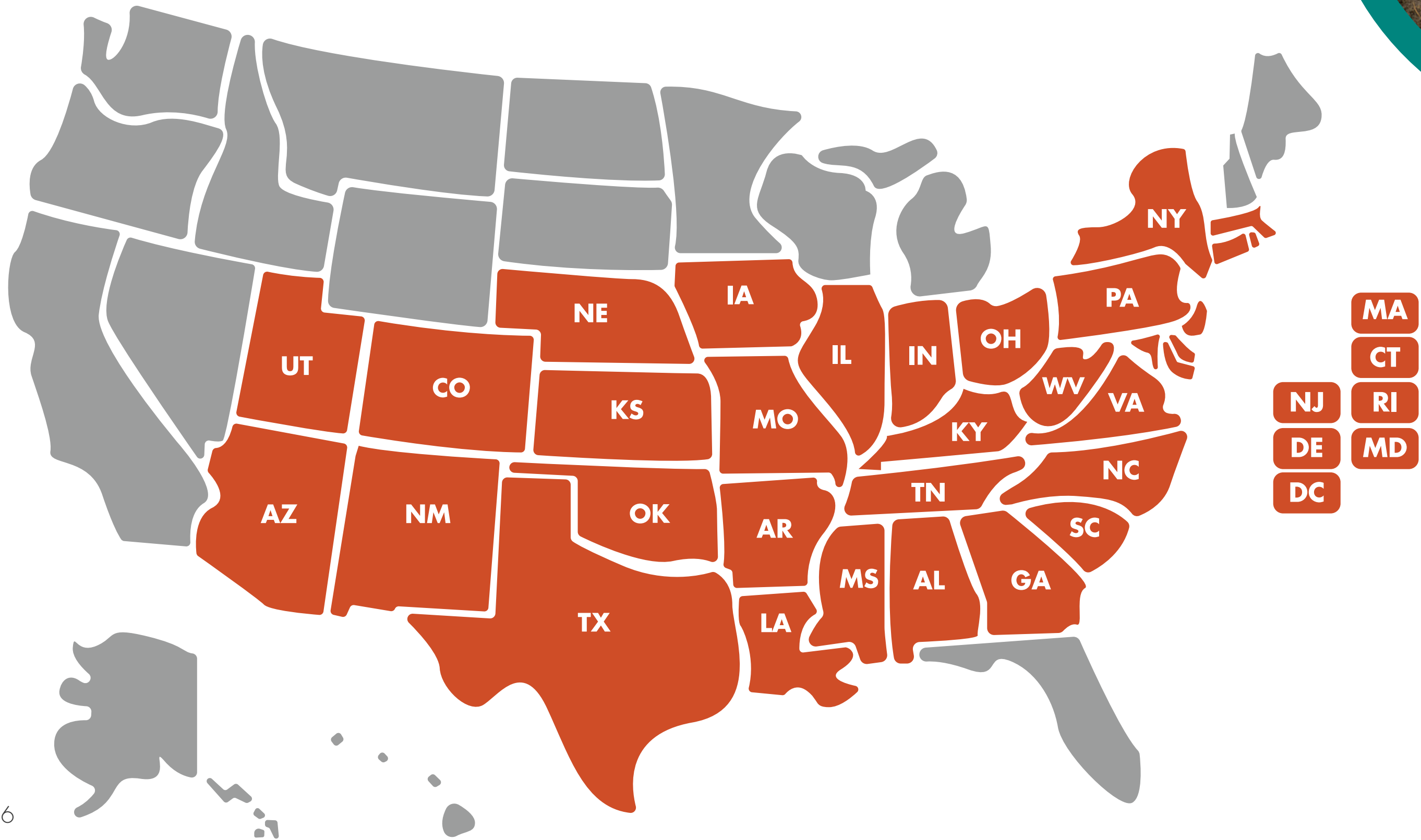
- Possible building department approval (depending on the scope of the project)
- Tour and approve the site with the project manager to ensure correct placement and spacing

INSTALLATION

We offer install in these 32 states.

In many states, School Outfitters handles playground projects from start to finish. We work with your facilities team to plan the space, manage the project, and complete the install — so you’re not coordinating between an equipment supplier and a separate crew. One partner, one point of contact, ready for recess.

Talk to one of our playground specialists to learn more about playground install near you.



EVALUATION & MAINTENANCE

Evaluating success and maintaining your playground.



Evaluating Success

We hope that once your playground is complete, you'll have a grand opening where you can share your success to the community. Smiling, happy kids are your reward! Later, we suggest you survey key stakeholders to determine if you have hit the mark. This can be a simple online survey through a platform like Survey Monkey. Keep it to five questions or less for a better overall response. The National Recreation and Park Association also offers a PDF that helps you measure success in large park environments.

Maintenance

Create your maintenance schedule and make sure the maintenance team is aware when they need to inspect the playground equipment for wear and tear or breakage. Good partners will track warranties and resolve them without you having to contact the manufacturer.

We’re ready to help!

Are you ready to begin your outdoor playground project? School Outfitters can help.

Start by talking to one of our playground planning experts. Together, we can build engaging and memorable outdoor learning experiences for your students.

Talk to an outdoor furniture and
playground expert today.

1-800-260-2776 | sales@schooloutfitters.com