

## Purpose and Goals

### Grant Objective

The intent of this grant is for elementary schools to upgrade or create an all-abilities (inclusive) playground that enables meaningful participation for students with disabilities by removing physical, sensory, and social barriers to play, the project strengthens student participation with peers, increases equitable access to physical activity, and supports positive peer interaction across the school community.

This request meets the law for use of mineral lease funds as it is "experimentation in the use of facilities designed to improve the quality of education in Utah" This proposal seeks mineral lease funds to be distributed in the form of grants coupled with matching funds from LEAs.

### Meaningful Inclusion

Meaningful inclusion occurs when students with disabilities can participate, engage, and build relationships with peers during free, unstructured times such as recess, passing time, transitions, and lunch.

### Project Approach

This proposal is intentionally designed to remove barriers to participation by supporting students with disabilities to participate in, initiate, and lead free-time activities alongside nondisabled peers. The overarching goal is to foster independence, and social connection through inclusive play.

## 1. Need

Recess is vital for children's social development, but traditional playgrounds often exclude students with disabilities, limiting their opportunities for interaction. Schools should proactively prepare for inclusivity regardless of current enrollment by building accessible playgrounds from the outset. All-abilities playgrounds fill this gap by accommodating diverse needs, supporting schools in not only meeting accessibility standards, but also ensuring both current and future students will be able to participate fully.

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All-Abilities Playgrounds support every student. For someone temporarily using a wheelchair, these playgrounds offer ongoing access instead of isolation. Students with disabilities can join games and activities alongside their peers without accessibility barriers. Everyone is included, and no one is limited to participating in or accessing any part of the playground

## 2. Project Description (What We Will Build)

Participating schools will plan and install an all-abilities playground or update their current playground design using inclusive design principles (often referred to as universal design) so students with diverse abilities can access and enjoy a full range of play experiences. Projects may include new construction or targeted upgrades to existing play areas. Example suggestions are listed below for consideration.

- **Accessible routes, surfacing, and circulation** (e.g., stable/firm surfacing and sufficient turning space) to connect key play components.
- **Multiple ways to play** (climb, swing, spin, slide, balance, pretend, build, and collaborate) at varied challenge levels.
- **Ground-level and elevated play opportunities** with ramps or transfer systems so students can participate together rather than separately.
- **Sensory-rich features** (e.g., music, tactile elements) paired with options for students who need lower stimulation.
- **Spaces that support social connection** such as multi-user elements, group gathering spots, and “join-in” points that make peer entry into play easier.
- **Comfort/cozy spaces** for self-regulation and breaks without leaving the play area.
- **Communication supports** (as feasible) such as playground communication boards to encourage peer interaction for students with limited verbal speech.

## 4. Evidence Base (Why Inclusive Playgrounds Work)

Research consistently identifies playgrounds as critical developmental environments, while also finding that children with disabilities often face barriers that limit access and participation. A systematic review by Fernelius & Christensen identified evidence-based inclusive playground design practices associated with improved opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in playground play. In addition, a scoping review by Brown and colleagues synthesized evidence-informed recommendations for designing inclusive playgrounds and emphasized that inclusion is influenced not only by the play structures themselves, but also by entry points, surfacing and paths, and the surrounding social environment (including supervision and the design process).

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Federal accessibility guidance also underscores that accessibility should be integrated early in planning through layout, circulation paths, and component selection, and that designers are encouraged to exceed minimum requirements where possible to increase usability and opportunity. This grant leverages that principle by funding playground projects that intentionally design for participation and belonging, not simply code compliance.

Brown, D. M. Y., Ross, T., Leo, J., Buliung, R. N., Shirazipour, C. H., Latimer-Cheung, A. E., & Arbour-Nicitopoulos, K. P. (2021). *A scoping review of evidence-informed recommendations for designing inclusive playgrounds*. *Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences*, 2, 664595. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fresc.2021.664595>

Fernelius, C. L., & Christensen, K. M. (2017). *Systematic review of evidence-based practices for inclusive playground design*. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 27(3), 78–102. <https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.27.3.0078>

U.S. Access Board. (2007). *Accessible play areas: A summary of accessibility guidelines for play areas*. <https://www.access-board.gov/files/ada/guides/play-areas.pdf>

## 6. Implementation

Schools will (1) engage stakeholders (students, families, special education staff, and facilities personnel) to identify barriers and prioritize inclusive play features; (2) finalize design and budget aligned to accessibility requirements and inclusive design recommendations; (3) secure matching funds and/or partners as applicable; and (4) complete installation and staff orientation within the grant performance period.

## 7. Evaluation (Observation and Survey Components)

To evaluate effectiveness, participating schools will use a simple pre/post approach that measures both **use and participation** (what students do on the playground) and **perceived inclusion** (how students and staff experience recess). Data will be collected prior to construction/installation (baseline) and again after the playground opens (follow-up), and results will be used to document impact and guide continuous improvement.

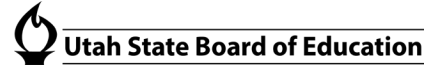
**Observation component:** Researchers will conduct structured recess observations (e.g., multiple brief observation periods across several days) to document (1) access to key play areas, (2) active participation vs. time spent on the sidelines, and (3) peer interaction (e.g.,

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shared equipment use, cooperative play). Observations will occur at baseline and follow-up using a consistent method and schedule.

**Survey component:** Researchers provide schools with a brief survey to staff supervising recess and, where appropriate, students and/or families to assess perceived accessibility/usability, student engagement, and whether students with disabilities are able to initiate, join, and sustain play with peers. Surveys will be administered at baseline and follow-up to capture change over time.

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