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## Hopkins Hill Elementary gets new plantings to spruce up school grounds

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Submitted Photos

COVENTRY – Twelve young and healthy new trees are now gracing the premises of Hopkins Hill Elementary School thanks to the efforts of the Hopkins Hill PTA and the school's playground committee. The plantings, according to PTA Playground Committee Chair Karen Haskell, are

part of a larger process to revitalize the school grounds.

The outdoor space surrounding the school, located at 95 Johnson Boulevard, has been heavily damaged over the years because of sand from some nearby dunes abutting the property. The dunes are the result of the nearby land being stripped by a developer years ago and never actually developed. The wind blows the sand around and causes numerous health and safety issues, so the school department installed a fence with protective slats installed on the property last year to prevent the sand from blowing toward students when outside.

Haskell said the sand has also destroyed the small amount of grass on the property and any other plant life in the outdoor space next to the school. It made the blacktop slick and often led to recess being cancelled so students wouldn't be whipped with sand. The school also had an issue with ATVs and dirt bike riders riding on the dunes during and after school hours. The fence has helped with the incidents of ATV traffic and the impact of the sand, but now the PTA is trying to make the area outside the school a safe and usable space for students and teachers to enjoy.

"It's been a slow but steady process," said Haskell this week after the planting.

Some 30 adult and student volunteers gathered at the school on a brisk but sunny October morning over the weekend, including Hopkins Hill Elementary School Principal Kathryn Tancrelle and Coventry Superintendent Craig Levis, who each helped dig holes and plant the trees. The PTA purchased the trees through the Rhode Island Tree Council, and what the organization didn't donate the group covered out-of-pocket with the funds they've raised for the revitalization project.

The PTA brought in a design company, Searle Design Group, to create a blueprint of the landscaping they could follow when planting the trees, which included Oak, Yellowwood and Sweet Gum trees.

Though the trees are only about 10 feet tall right now, Haskell said they will grow with the school and be fully developed trees in 10 years time. There are technically 13 trees that have been planted, since the PTA added the first tree back in May.

"We're very excited," said Haskell. "They look so good. Hopefully they'll look even better in a year or two."

"It's all part of revitalizing that outdoor space," she explained. "There aren't many trees out there and as they grow they'll help keep out more sand from coming over the fence. It will help on a really windy day because some sand will still come up and over the fence. We want to make the area safe and usable for our students and the community. There are a lot of people in the area who use that space so we want everyone to be able to enjoy it."

The next step in the revitalization process is creating an outdoor classroom, a small deck and benches outside the school where teachers can bring students for outdoor learning activities. Last year students read a book about a group of kids building fairy houses outside their school. Their teacher wanted to organize a similar activity with her class, but there was no space outside the school ideal for the activity.

"It'll give more opportunity for teachers to connect the outdoor lessons with what they're doing inside the classroom," said Haskell.

Haskell said the PTA and playground committee have received ongoing support from the school department, school committee and superintendent for the project.

"The Playground Committee and the PTA are doing a wonderful job and a great deal of hard work supporting the playground project," said Tancrelle. "They have been instrumental in helping to advocate for some positive changes with the trees a wonderful addition. We are very appreciative of their advocacy and dedication."

The next Hopkins Hill PTA fundraiser, the color run, will be held in April.

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