

Besançon: “An eco-friendly, gender-respectful and inclusive school playground”

Interview with Samuel Lelièvre,
*Director of Biodiversity and Green Spaces,
City of Besançon.*

La Santé en action: Why completely overhaul school playgrounds?

Samuel Lelièvre: The development of school playgrounds is a political project: we started from the observation that the school “living space” is essential for children's health and quality of life. The city of Besançon has budgeted €60-million over the duration of the mandate to regenerate and redevelop the highest priority schools among its 64 nursery and primary schools. First target: the renovation of heating and energy systems, some of which date from the 1950s. Another major focus: transforming school playgrounds to combat heat islands, among other factors – this area has a specific budget of €10-million. To design these new school playgrounds, we raised the question of the child's relationship to others and to nature. Aspects we took into account were: mixing of girls and boys; inclusion of everyone, from the tiniest to the tallest and from the most active to the least able-bodied; reconnection to nature; and making the playground a place that supports learning.

S. A.: What has been the biggest change?

S.L.: Instead of an asphalt yard for football players, we are moving to a very different concept: putting children and their needs at the centre. So, at Pierre-Brossolette school, where our first major renovation took place, the 5,000-m² playground (the largest in the region) serving 150 students was previously completely paved. It is now planted and the ground is permeable, with pride of place given to trees and grassy areas. The work took place during 2021. We have opened it up to the neighbourhood: parents and children will be able to come outside school hours for other activities, such as gardening (shared garden project not yet finalized); we have also designed a “nature area” connected to the neighbourhood and accessible to all residents. Before this, the majority of the

children – girls and boys – were relegated to the outskirts of the playground while a small number of children – mainly boys – monopolized the centre of the playground with ball games. The reorganized playground now includes nature corners, gardening areas and games areas. This means that all children are given an equal place. It is designed so that everyone feels safe there. It allows children to reconnect with nature: it has become a park with shaded areas, and the children garden there with the teachers. Children can choose quiet areas with trusted peers for more cooperative games. The primary objective is to improve their quality of life. In this school, we have a local unit for inclusive education (ULIS) so we have developed facilities with materials – tested by an accessibility committee – suitable for those with additional needs that are available throughout the playground, which aims to be totally inclusive. In summary, we have designed an eco-friendly, gender-respectful and inclusive school playground. The objective is to be able to redevelop four to five school playgrounds per year, co-financed by the city, the water agency and the region.

S. A.: Following on from this, what are your first observations?

S.L.: The various city departments involved – education, urban planning, construction, participatory democracy – worked together for two years (2020–2021). We created a working group and consulted the teaching community, the education board, local residents, parent representatives at workshops and children. The children also got involved in planting trees during school events. We opened the Pierre-Brossolette school playground at the start of the school year in September 2021 and it is still too early to draw any conclusions. We are giving ourselves time to see what works and what doesn't, such as the extensive grassy areas, among other things. We took inspiration from countries like Germany and Finland; and in France from Paris, Grenoble and Lille. Several cities like Dijon and Morteau have visited to see how we did it. One of the greatest difficulties is



© JC Sève / City of Besançon

to convince the reluctant pupils, who were nostalgic for the marked out lines, football and handball goals or basketball hoops. We started from the premise that the playground should allow physical activity in general and not be focused only on sports. There is existing infrastructure for sports nearby, including a dojo and a swimming pool less than 10 minutes' walk away. The playground cannot fulfil everyone's wishes. The greatest difficulty that remains is knowing how to find the right balance between sports practice and physical activity. Another difficulty to overcome is that opening up the playground as a public space raises questions of maintaining cleanliness and securing the site. It is crucial for a development of this type to be accompanied by changes in access to the interior of the school (entrance hall, doormats, clean area, changes in cleaning techniques). We have to support this change, but it now seems unthinkable to us to no longer offer this type of playground, which makes the school “a hub” for the neighbourhood. ■

Interview by Yves Géry, Editor-in-Chief.

Feature
Urban planning dedicated to health