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USF Students Refurbish Pizzo's Playground By Elizabeth A. Leib

Thanks to a very special group of USF Students, Pizzo Elementary's pre-school age autism students in the Early Exceptional Learning Program will be playing on a newly refurbished playground. USF Students involved in the Helping Hands: University of South Florida's Student Council for Exceptional Children have just completed a project to give a much needed update to the playground. The project officially began in the late summer of 2008 with the sale of coupon books to raise money coordinated by Mallory McGinnis and Molly McCann. Following this very successful fundraiser, Camille Joyner organized a charity concert in Dade City to raise additional funds. To encourage further community support, McCann asked for donations from individuals and businesses in the community. Community Relations Specialist Laura Ferrario from BJ's Wholesale Club in New Tampa and the Community Relations Specialist from Home Depot in New Port Richey responded with enthusiasm. In addition to product donations, a group of employees from BJ's Wholesale Club volunteered their time to help with the clean-up of the playground and installation of a new sandbox in time for the May 23rd ribbon cutting.

After raising money, SCEC members began a search for a new sandbox or skilled carpenter willing to build a new sandbox for the playground. The students soon learned that the design of the sandbox was unique because of requirements related to the special needs of the students. After a lengthy search, Mitchell High School teacher Jack Gilbert, who works with special needs students to prepare them to enter the workforce, offered to become involved in the project. Gilbert's high school students helped design the sandbox, communicate with employees at Home Depot in New Port Richey to order and purchase materials and then construct the sandbox. Mr. Gilbert's students assisted with the delivery and installation of the sandbox prior to the ribbon cutting.

The children at Pizzo Elementary are now laughing and playing on an attractive, inviting playground and the students at Mitchell High School are feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment. And USF members SCEC enjoyed collaborating with professionals and finding individuals in the community to help make this project happen.

About SCEC: The Student Council for Exceptional Children (SCEC) is a student service organization at the University of South Florida. The SCEC is a division of the national Council for Exceptional Children, which is dedicated to advocating for and improving the educational outcomes of students with various disabilities. If you would like more information about this organization, please contact Molly McCann at 813-205-6004.