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Structure allows children to avoid effects of too much sun exposure

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Students at Jack D. Johnson Elementary are enjoying the great outdoors without the risks that come with being in the sun.

A new permanent canopy made possible by the school's faculty, parents and a Southlake dermatologist is taking the heat off of having fun for kids at the Carroll district school.

"Kids are really playing a lot under the structure," said Blake Bunnell, a fourth-grader whose mother, Gina Bunnell, helped apply for a grant to pay for it. "Everyone I talk to about it says they absolutely love it."

The canopy is an example of how teamwork can make a difference, school Principal Lori Allison said. Teachers, the PTO and volunteers worked together to gather information and write the essay needed to apply for a grant from the American Academy of Dermatology.

"We were interested in finding an alternative to being out in the sun, especially knowing what August and September is like," Allison said. "The shade structures allow students to get out and run and continue playing without being exposed to the sun."

With no shade trees, the children were at risk for skin damage and cancer later in life, said Dr. Angela Bowers-Plott, the Southlake dermatologist who helped secure the grant for the \$8,000 canopy, which blocks ultraviolet rays.

"Children are outside during those peak hours of sunshine when the intensity of the rays is the highest," she said. "People pay the price at some point for that initial damage, so helping protect these kids early on will pay off later."

Johnson Elementary is among a growing number of schools to receive the American Academy of Dermatology shade structure grant. Since 2000, the academy has awarded 212 grants nationwide, spokeswoman Jennifer Allyn said.

"Taken together, these structures provide shade each day for nearly 158,000 individuals," she said.

To be considered, a school or nonprofit organization must serve children and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to sun safety and skin cancer awareness. It must also have a sun safety/skin cancer awareness program in place for at least a year. While the canopy provides some protection, children should also wear hats and protective clothing outdoors and slather on the sunscreen, Bowers-Plott said.

Seeing Jack D. Johnson at the dedication ceremony Friday may have also helped drive home the message that sun exposure can lead to skin cancer, she said. Johnson, for whom the school is named, had part of his ear removed because of skin cancer. Johnson was the Carroll district's first superintendent and retired in 1987 after 30 years.

More than 2 million nonmalignant skin cancer cases are diagnosed annually in the United States. In 2010, there were 114,900 new cases of melanoma and 8,700 deaths. Melanoma is the most common cancer occurring in people between ages 25 and 29.

Parents of schoolchildren are at the age when they see the effects of sunburns they had as children and teens, Bowers-Plott said.

"It's hard to get sunscreen on kids, but I see what happens later on in life," she said. "This is one way we can protect them."

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