



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SMYTH COUNTY SCHOOLS

Youngsters are getting exercise and interaction on the new playground at AES.

# Atkins Elementary celebrates new playground

### STAFF REPORT

A Friday ribbon-cutting ceremony at Atkins Elementary celebrated more than a decade of work. Officials, funders, school staff and students gathered to check out the new playground.

Installed in 1995, the school's original equipment served generations of students but had grown outdated and officials were concerned it might pose a threat to student safety.

In the 2010-2011 school year, according to an AES news release, the type of aging equipment and a merry-go-round were linked to traumatic injuries, raising safety concerns.

However, the cost of playground equipment has risen dramatically in recent years. Companies that sell playground equipment say that a smaller project can cost \$25,000 to \$75,000, while larger one can easily reach six digits. That's not funding that is part of a school systems budget.

However, other private funders began to step forward.

According to the release, in 2017, Ballad Health partnered with the school through the Project Fit America initiative, bringing a workout-style playground to the campus, a welcome addition, but not a full replacement for traditional play structures.

By April 2025, the release noted, the deterioration of the 1995-era playground had reached a point that action was needed.

School staff approached principal, Gary Roberts, to discuss forming a committee dedicated to replacing the equipment. Within months, the wheels were in motion. The playground was officially ordered in October 2025, and by November a crew of volunteers had removed the old equipment. The new playground was delivered in December 2025 and installed in February, despite weather delays.

"The new playground is a testament to what a community can achieve when it pulls together. The project was made possible through generous monetary



Officials, supporters and funders joined Smyth County Schools staff to celebrate the new playground at Atkins Elementary.

support and grant funding from key partners, including the Smyth County Foundation, Wellsprings Foundation, and Sentara. These contributions, alongside support from local organizations and individuals, provided the financial foundation necessary to bring the project to fruition," said the release.

It continued, "Current and former educators and administrators helped cultivate a school culture that welcomed community involvement, while county leaders and supervisors championed the project through continuous advocacy on behalf of their constituents."

Since its installation, the playground has seen regular use, not only by Atkins Elementary students during the school day, but also by community members and

families in the evenings and on weekends. Organizers say this dual-use purpose was always part of the vision: a space that belongs to the whole community, not just the school.

"Today is a celebration of what makes our community truly special, the spirit, heart, and energy of every individual who lives, learns, and plays here," Ashley Cannon said at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. "It is a reflection of our shared pride, our commitment to one another, and the collective effort that brings us together. Let this moment remind us of the strength we hold as a community and inspire us to continue building something even greater for the future."

The Playground Committee is already looking ahead to Phase II, with hopes to expand and enhance



the play area even further. Community members are encouraged to stay engaged and watch for opportunities to get involved.

