

NATIONAL PLAYGROUND CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION, INC.

BUILDING BETTER PLAY

AT A GLANCE

**NATIONAL PLAYGROUND CONTRACTORS
ASSOCIATION, INC. (NPCAI)**

WHERE: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WEBSITE: www.playground-contractors.org

**PLAYING TOWARDS
THE FUTURE OF
RECREATIONAL SPACES
ACROSS NORTH AMERICA.**

There was a time when building a playground was viewed as a relatively simple undertaking. A slide, a set of swings, perhaps a climbing structure installed by a local contractor, and the project was complete. Today, however, playgrounds have become sophisticated community destinations that combine engineering, accessibility, safety science, artistic design, sustainability considerations, and long-term

public investment. Behind many of these projects is a growing network of highly trained professionals working to ensure every installation meets modern expectations.

At the center of that evolution stands the National Playground Contractors Association, Inc. (NPCAI), an organization dedicated to improving professionalism, safety standards, and collaboration across the playground construction industry. Through advocacy, certification, training, and industry partnerships, the association has become a leading force in helping contractors adapt to an increasingly specialized and rapidly growing market.

For Edward C. Miller Jr., past president of the NPCAI, the transformation of the industry over the past several decades has been remarkable. Having spent more than 40 years in the sector, Miller has witnessed firsthand how playgrounds have evolved from basic recreational spaces into elaborate, thoughtfully designed environments that serve entire communities.

“The playground industry has really blossomed over many years,” Miller says. “Contractors were really looking for some guidance to make sure everybody was doing everything the way it should be done.”

That need for guidance ultimately helped shape the NPCAI into the influential organization it is today.

RAISING THE BAR FOR PROFESSIONALISM

One of the association’s core missions is elevating the credibility and professionalism of playground contractors. According to Miller, the industry has matured far beyond the stereotype of a contractor simply arriving on site with a pickup truck and a toolbox.

“It’s really someone who is out there, knows the trade, knows what requirements need to be met for the manufacturers, for the industry from a safety perspective, compliance perspective,” Miller says. “We really advocate to be a resource to give all of our members the information that they need to know and how to execute it.”

A major part of that effort is the NPCAI’s Recreation



Installation Specialist Certification program, widely known throughout the industry as RISC. The certification initiative has become one of the organization’s most important achievements and serves as a cornerstone of contractor education.

The RISC program offers both English and Spanish coursework while providing online and in-person testing opportunities. More importantly, it establishes consistent best practices for installation professionals working throughout North America.

“As part of that course, our RISC certificants will get will get a perspective and get an education on what are the best ways to approach business, what the best ways are to approach an installation,” Miller says.

The curriculum covers everything from OSHA compliance and personal protective equipment requirements to equipment usage, site awareness, utility clearances, and adherence to manufacturer specifications. For the NPCAI, proper installation procedures are not optional details but critical elements that directly affect both safety and liability.

“We’re a huge proponent of following manufacturer’s specifications,” Miller explains. “If you don’t follow the manufacturer’s specifications, you’re eating the liability immediately.”

The certification program also reflects a broader shift taking place throughout the industry. Playground construction is no longer viewed as a secondary or casual trade. Instead, it is becoming recognized as a specialized profession requiring technical expertise, project coordination skills, and ongoing education.

SAFETY BEGINS LONG BEFORE INSTALLATION

While playground safety is often associated with the finished product, the NPCAI emphasizes that safety begins long before children ever use the equipment. According to Miller, awareness during the construction process is one of the most important factors contributing to successful project outcomes.

“Safety is an issue on every site, every type of construction site,” Miller says. “The ultimate factors that lead to a safe site are being aware of site layout,

site conditions, what you need to do, who is on the site, and how you need to accommodate the different trades or different things that are going on within the site itself.”

That philosophy extends beyond playground-specific concerns and incorporates broader construction site coordination. Contractors must understand how their work interacts with electricians, plumbers, site developers, and municipal schedules. A lack of communication or awareness can create inefficiencies during construction and potentially compromise long-term playground performance.

“If they’re not paying attention to what the site is during the construction process, that could affect the stability of the unit itself,” Miller says. “It could affect the flow of the area once it’s completed.”

The NPCAI’s emphasis on holistic awareness reflects the growing complexity of modern recreational projects. Large destination parks, school campuses, and civic recreation areas frequently involve multiple contractors operating simultaneously within confined spaces. In that environment, coordination becomes essential.

The association’s training efforts aim to ensure that installers are not simply focused on assembling equipment but are also considering accessibility, long-term maintenance, user flow, environmental conditions, and overall site functionality.

ADDRESSING WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

Like many skilled trades industries, playground construction faces ongoing workforce development challenges. Labor shortages and a shrinking pool of skilled tradespeople have become common concerns across North America, and the playground sector is no exception.

For the NPCAI, maintaining a strong contractor network is essential to supporting future industry growth.

“Workforce development is a huge topic,” Miller says. “This industry is no different.”

The association has responded by creating



opportunities for networking, job placement, and industry visibility. Through certification programs, online resources, and partnerships with manufacturers, the NPCAI helps contractors connect with employment opportunities while also encouraging the next generation of skilled professionals to enter the field.

The organization also operates a job board and

contractor registry designed to connect qualified installers with manufacturers, sales representatives, and project opportunities throughout the industry.

“We network with the manufacturers constantly to ensure that their base of installers is properly trained and are aware of the workloads that are going on,” Miller says.

Equally important is the association’s role as an educational resource. By helping contractors better understand industry standards and installation expectations, the NPCAI empowers its members to become trusted advisors for clients and municipalities alike.

“We provide them on an individual basis with more information,” Miller says. “So they become the resource

for their client, the same way the organization is the resource for them.”

COLLABORATION DRIVING BETTER OUTCOMES

Throughout the interview, one theme surfaced repeatedly: collaboration.

For Miller, successful playground projects rely on strong communication between contractors, manufacturers, municipalities, school districts, architects, and parks departments. The earlier those relationships are established, the more successful the project is likely to become.

“One of the biggest problems that I see individually and in speaking to our membership is the failure to engage a qualified contractor as early as possible,” Miller says.

Contractors, he explains, offer a practical perspective that complements the expertise of engineers, architects, and designers. Because installers are ultimately responsible for turning conceptual plans into physical reality, they often identify logistical challenges others may overlook.

“Contractors are really the people who quite literally put everything together,” Miller says. “They put the design ideas into making it a reality.”

Early contractor involvement can help avoid issues related to site access, equipment placement, utility conflicts, scheduling complications, and installation sequencing. It can also contribute to more efficient budgeting and smoother coordination between trades.

That collaborative spirit extends into product innovation as well. Manufacturers frequently consult experienced installers when developing new playground equipment and surfacing systems.

“I’ve been involved in many discussions where a manufacturer is coming up with something, and they spoke to me individually or spoke to some of our membership around the country to say, ‘Hey, we’re thinking about this, will that work?’” Miller says.



Because contractors work directly with installation materials in real-world environments, their feedback can prove invaluable during product development.

“It really gives everyone the best ability to have a successful product launch,” Miller says.

INDUSTRY GROWTH AND INNOVATION

The playground industry itself is experiencing significant momentum, fueled by increased public investment, community revitalization efforts, and demand for more engaging recreational experiences.

According to Miller, modern playgrounds bear little resemblance to those built decades ago.

“I’ve seen the transition from small pocket park playgrounds where there was a slide and a swing to incredibly elaborate and massive, very landscape-oriented destination parks,” Miller says.

Today’s playgrounds often incorporate inclusive design principles, custom surfacing, themed environments, climbing features, sensory elements, and integrated landscaping. Municipalities increasingly view these projects as long-term community assets capable of attracting families, promoting wellness, and enhancing civic identity.

Miller believes competition between municipalities and park systems has also contributed to the industry’s rapid evolution.

“Everybody wants to see something new, maybe a little bit better than someone else has,” Miller says.

That desire for innovation has encouraged manufacturers to push design boundaries while creating increasingly sophisticated equipment systems continuously. At the same time, contractors have had to adapt to more advanced installation requirements and evolving construction techniques.

The NPCAI’s role is to ensure its members remain prepared for those changing expectations.

“We encourage our members to stay on top of all of that from the capability end by working with the manufacturers and designers,” Miller says.



STRENGTHENING INDUSTRY STANDARDS

Beyond certification and education, the NPCAI has also worked alongside influential organizations to help establish stronger industry benchmarks.

One recent example is the association’s collaboration with ASTM International on Standard Guide 3699, which provides guidance on playground contractor installation practices.

“It’s really an industry-leading standard that allows

or gives guidance to the best training for playground installers,” Miller says.

The association also works alongside organizations such as the National Recreation and Park Association and the American Society of Landscape Architects to promote higher professional standards and encourage municipalities to prioritize qualified contractors during procurement processes.

“We feel they’re the best prepared, they’re the most

professional, and they’re going to give us the best project in the end,” Miller says.

Those partnerships reinforce the growing recognition that playground construction is a specialized discipline requiring both technical knowledge and collaborative expertise.

A PROFESSION BUILT FOR THE FUTURE

As communities continue investing in parks, schools, and recreational infrastructure, the demand for safe,

innovative, and professionally installed playgrounds is expected to remain strong.

For the NPCAI, that growth represents both an opportunity and a responsibility.

The association is working not only to support contractors but also to elevate the entire industry through education, networking, collaboration, and advocacy. Its efforts are helping ensure that playgrounds remain safe, functional, and inspiring places for generations of children and families.

For Miller, the industry’s continued evolution is something to embrace rather than resist.

“The people who are doing this as a profession seek those challenges,” Miller says. “We enjoy them.”

As playgrounds become increasingly ambitious in both scale and creativity, organizations like the NPCAI are helping ensure the professionals behind those projects are equally prepared to meet the moment.