



Best Practice: Converting Schoolyards to Community Playgrounds

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CITY: NEW YORK CITY

POLICY AREAS: CITY PLANNING; PARKS AND GREEN SPACES

BEST PRACTICE

The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation's (DPR) Schoolyards to Playgrounds Program converts elementary and middle school schoolyards to community playgrounds for use by the general public after school hours, on the weekends, and during school breaks. The program is a cornerstone of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's long-term sustainability plan, PlaNYC, and helps fulfill the goal of bringing all New Yorkers within a 10-minute, quarter-mile walk of a park by 2030.

Of the 290 sites originally selected, 69 opened in 2007 without capital improvements. The remaining schoolyards will receive improvements such as play equipment, turf fields, gardens, sports courts, benches, trees, and outdoor classrooms.

ISSUE

When PlaNYC launched in 2007, New York City had fewer acres of green space per person than almost any other major U.S. city. The current standard for park space in New York is 1.5 acres per thousand people. For playgrounds, it is 1,250 children per playground. In 2007, 97 out of 188 city neighborhoods had more than 1,250 children per playground. The City estimated that 50 neighborhoods would have less than 1.5 acres of open space per thousand people by 2030 given an increasing population. In addition to concerns about the density of open space in neighborhoods, 2.5 million New Yorkers lived farther than a 10-minute walk to a park in 2007.

To address the need for open space, the City identified schoolyards as an underutilized resource since they were used only a few hours a day and just by the school population. The rest of the time, most schoolyards were locked to the surrounding community all summer, every weekend, and every evening.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The Schoolyards to Playgrounds Program helps fulfill Mayor Bloomberg's goal of bringing all New Yorkers within a 10-minute walk of a park and provides proper play space for more than 360,000 children by 2030. The addition of both active and passive open space in neighborhoods with few existing parks provides a host of benefits:

Public Health

- Reduced obesity
- Improved air quality

Environmental

- Addition of more permeable surfaces for stormwater capture
- Reduced urban heat island effect
- Reduced noise pollution
- Environmental education opportunities with gardens, painted games, and outdoor classrooms

Social

- Creates public space for community gathering
- Design process teaches kids about landscape architecture



Best Practice: Converting Schoolyards to Community Playgrounds

IMPLEMENTATION

Before the launch of PlaNYC, 290 schoolyards were selected for conversion through a geographic information system (GIS) mapping process that identified areas farther than a 10-minute walk to a park and neighborhoods with a high ratio of kids to playgrounds. The 290 sites were inspected through aerial photos or site visits and classified as a Category I, II, or III site:

Category	Planned Improvements	Number of Playgrounds
Category I (can be opened immediately)	No improvements required	69
Category II (New equipment required)	Painting and sealing pavement, upgrading or adding sports equipment, installing fitness and/or playground equipment, planting street trees and landscaping	150
Category III (Capital improvements required)	Category II improvements plus repaving damaged asphalt, new fencing and safety improvements	71
Total		290

The category designation informed the program's budget: Category II sites received \$400K for renovations and Category III sites received \$1.2M. Category I sites opened in July 2007 by simply unlocking the gates since the schoolyards had sufficient amenities. In total, \$117.2M in city funding was allocated for the program and split between the lead agencies and partner. Program implementation is led by the City Parks Department (DPR), Department of Education (DOE), and the non-profit Trust for Public Land (TPL), which works in cities across America to conserve land in order for people to enjoy local parks, playgrounds, and natural areas. The Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, which manages PlaNYC, helps facilitate inter-agency communication between program partners. The converted playgrounds remain DOE property and are maintained by school custodians.

Role of Program Partners

Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR)

Manages design, bid and award, and construction of 137 sites before turnover to DOE for maintenance. Provides landscape architecture and park management advice to program partners.

Department of Education

Manages design, bid and award, and construction of 30 sites. School custodial staff responsible for ongoing site maintenance and daily operations for all playgrounds.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL)

Drawing on experience in converting schoolyards in New York City and other metropolitan areas, TPL leads a participatory design (PD) process with 123 sites at the beginning of each schoolyard renovation that brings together school administration, children, parents, neighbors, and community groups. Three meetings are held, including a "Design Day" charrette where the community and school come to consensus on schoolyard design. TPL also leads workshops for school custodians and principals to promote programming and stewardship of recently completed sites. TPL manages design and construction of 28 sites, where TPL leads schools in a longer-form PD process that engages with the community and four classes once a week for three months.

Implementation Phases

Design – 4-6 months

- Three participatory design meetings with school and community to come to consensus on playground design. Includes presentation at a Parent Teachers Association meeting or other school function.

Best Practice: Converting Schoolyards to Community Playgrounds

- Landscape architecture team turns community-generated design into standard design documents and ensures amenities address existing site conditions and are within budget.



Schoolchildren become landscape architects during the three-meeting participatory design process. They place templates on a base map of their schoolyard to reflect their ideal playground and present the design at a public meeting.

Bid and Award – 6-8 months

- Design documents reviewed by legal departments.
- Work bid and awarded to qualified, low-bid contractor.

Construction – 6-8 months

- Contractor and construction managers meet with school administration to develop site safety plan to ensure construction proceeds smoothly around testing periods, fire drills, and dismissal.
- Construction substantially completed; inspections with custodian, school administration, and construction team to ensure work meets client expectations.



Construction often addresses infrastructure needs such as new asphalt before playground amenities like color seal coat can be applied.

Best Practice: Converting Schoolyards to Community Playgrounds

Completion

- Turnover of extra construction materials and maintenance guide to school custodian.
- School may organize community ribbon cutting to celebrate new playground.
- Stewardship workshop led by TPL with principal, custodian, and parent coordinator with grants for gardening activities.
- Custodial staff opens and closes schoolyard gates to public everyday from 8 am to dusk when school is not in session.
- Playgrounds listed on Parks Department website; temporary closures are noted.



Ribbon cuttings draw in neighbors and community groups to celebrate the new playground.

COST

The Mayor initially allocated \$117.2M in capital funding to renovate 221 of the 290 schoolyards and \$14.5M in expense funding per year to cover the additional labor and maintenance costs incurred by school custodians. The city reduced capital funding for the program in 2009 and 2011 as a result of the economy. From the \$14.5M in annual operations funding, each school custodian is reimbursed up to \$50,000 a year for ongoing maintenance costs which include labor and needed playground touch-ups and repairs. The non-profit Trust for Public Land provides private matching dollars for some of its schoolyard improvements.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The opening of 229 schoolyards to date has had a dramatic and widespread impact on neighborhoods around the city. Barren, asphalt lots have been transformed with amenities tailored to each community. Common elements include trees, gardens, painted games and sports courts, benches, gazebos, synthetic turf fields, and play equipment. Every borough has benefited, but the majority of the open sites have been in Brooklyn and Queens, which had the highest need for playgrounds before PlaNYC.

Open Schoolyards to Date by Borough

Bronx: 35
Brooklyn: 89
Manhattan: 17
Queens: 61
Staten Island: 27

Best Practice: Converting Schoolyards to Community Playgrounds

Overall Status to Date

260 Sites to Convert

- 69 sites opened July 2007 without renovations
- 160 sites opened after renovations by DOE, TPL, and DPR
- 10 sites in design or construction to open by end of 2013
- 21 sites on hold because of a lack of construction funding

Before and After Impact



Prior to renovation, many schoolyards lack play amenities or are not even used for recreation.

Schoolyards in Use



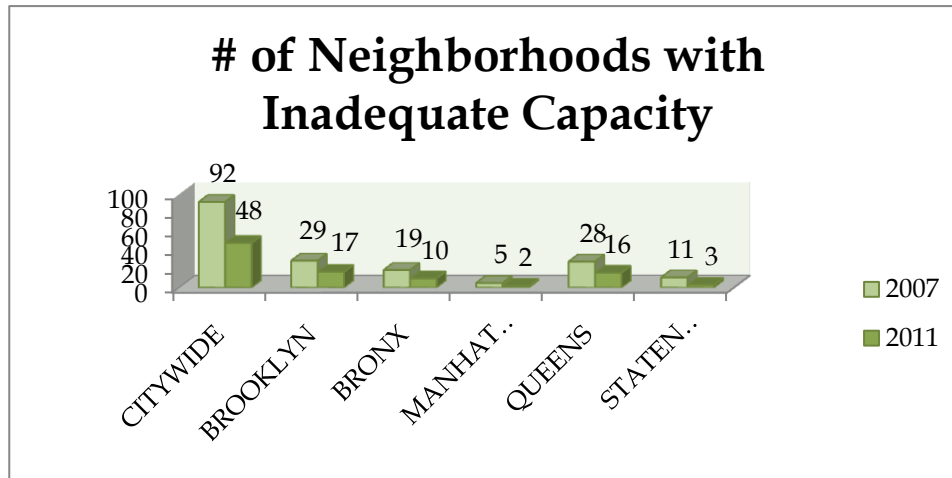
The variety of amenities in the schoolyards allow for multiple uses that draw in kids, parents, and neighbors.

Quantitative Measures of Success

The schoolyards program has driven increases in the number of New Yorkers within a ten-minute walk of a park and has reduced the ratio of kids to neighborhood playgrounds. Every Earth Day, the City updates the percentage of New Yorkers within a ten-minute walk of a park for the PlaNYC progress report. Between April 2007 and April 2013, the number of New Yorkers within a ten-minute walk of a park increased by more than 500,000 people. In 2007, there were 97 neighborhoods that did not meet the New York City standard for adequate playground capacity as measured by the number of children under 14 per playground in a given neighborhood. As of 2011, when the statistic was last updated, there were 48 neighborhoods that did not meet this standard. The table below shows how the number of neighborhoods with inadequate

Best Practice: Converting Schoolyards to Community Playgrounds

capacity has decreased in every borough, with the most significant reductions in boroughs where the majority of Schoolyard conversions were located.



The Parks Department conducted a usage study in August 2010 of 24 open sites. Inspectors visited each site once during the week and once on the weekend in the late afternoon. An average of 15 playground visitors was observed during the course of the visits at each site. 63% of visitors were under the age of 20. 75% of visitors indicated they walked to the playground. 69% reported using the playground for exercise either often or sometimes. Sites with low usage were removed from the program and replaced with nearby schoolyards.

The Department of Education measures schoolyard use through monthly surveys that custodians submit to get reimbursed for maintenance costs. Use is recorded as low, medium, or heavy and is compared against the dollar amount charged by the custodian.

Qualitative Measures of Success

Partners receive feedback from school principals, kids, custodians, and community members about success of the schoolyard. Negative feedback might take the form of neighbors complaining about after-hours use of the schoolyard, crime reports, litter, or vandalism. Issues are addressed through coordination with other city agencies and by changing operating hours when necessary. Positive feedback is collected in the form of schoolyard testimonials.

“Our new playground has been a wonderful resource for both our school and the surrounding community. Persons of all ages have been able to enjoy the space. From the tranquility of the Victory Garden where elder neighbors practice Tai Chi to the great surfaces that enable our youngsters to move safely and freely, the playground has become an oasis for our community.”

- Kerri Moser, Assistant Principal, PS 254, Brooklyn

“I felt very happy and excited to design my own playground because I love designing things and now my design will help design a playground. I contributed the snake bench to the new playground. I learned that first you need to design the playground before you build it. You need to like what you design [and] create a rough draft before you put together a permanent design. I think that my community will like having their own playground to play in. I think they will like it because now they will have a place to play in after a long school week. I think they will enjoy playing in the playground.”

- Grade 3 student, PS 69, Queens



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TIMELINE

April 2007

PlaNYC unveiled – list of 290 schoolyards released. 5.7M or 70% of New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park

July 2007

69 “Turnkey” Category I sites open to the public.

September 2007

First participatory design meeting held at a school in Queens with Parks and TPL

September 2008

Construction starts on first schoolyard to receive capital improvements. In first year of the participatory design phase, 82 community-generated playground designs completed after 246 meetings with school communities.

April 2009

A \$16M budget cut reduces the number of schoolyards in the program from 290 to 264.

June 2009

Mayor Bloomberg cuts the ribbon at PS 205 in Brooklyn, celebrating the first schoolyard to receive capital improvements. Participatory design phase concludes after 369th community meeting.

October 2009

Just over a year after starting construction on the first site, 45 playgrounds are in active construction around the city.

December 2009

100 schoolyards open to the public

April 2010

122 schoolyards open to the public. 5.8M or 73% of New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park.

September 2010

150 schoolyards open to the public

January 2011

Program sustains \$7.4M budget cut, further reducing construction funding to complete designed sites.

April 2011

177 schoolyards open to the public. 5.9M or 74% of New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park.

November 2011

Mayor Bloomberg celebrates the opening of PS 69 in Queens, the 200th schoolyard to open to the public.

April 2012

212 schoolyards open to the public. 6.17M or 75.6% of New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park.

April 2013

229 schoolyards open to the public. 6.2M or 76.3% of New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park. A remaining 14 sites will open by the end of 2013 after renovations.

Best Practice: Converting Schoolyards to Community Playgrounds

LESSONS LEARNED

Challenging Existing Site Conditions

There were several schoolyards on the original list of 290 that had poor visibility to the street or very small yards that would make them unsafe or inadequate as a community playground. These playgrounds were eventually replaced with other renovated schoolyards in the neighborhoods. In addition, the Type II and III categorization of sites – which informed the construction budget – did not often reflect the reality of the existing site infrastructure or underlying conditions. For example, many Type II sites required basic infrastructure work such as new fencing, drainage, asphalt, and curbs before the installation of amenities. The \$400K allocation for Type II sites was only for amenities. In response, the team investigated ways to “stretch” construction dollars, i.e. researching and field testing asphalt patching products, developing details for installing synthetic turf on existing asphalt and more cost effective methods for applying color seal coat graphics and games. However, because of the two major budget cuts that wiped out funding to cover these types of construction overruns, 21 sites that were designed were placed on hold. The team decided it was necessary to address the infrastructure work even if it wasn't budgeted to ensure the playground renovations would be long-lasting and safe. Other site conditions required unforeseen coordination with city agencies such as the Department of Sanitation (DSNY) and Environmental Protection (DEP). Some of the yards had several dumpsters that had to be removed or relocated in coordination with Sanitation. Major drainage work at some of the sites required approvals from DEP.

Community Concerns

The prospect of renovating and then opening schoolyards that had been locked raised concerns from the school administration, neighbors, and community groups at some of the sites during the initial meetings held at each school. Common concerns included increased noise, vandalism, an influx of visitors from outside the neighborhood, and reduced parking spots. Communities were often most vocal in instances where users had been breaking into the schoolyard to engage in negative behaviors at night. Cooperation with other city agencies such as the police and fire departments helped address more serious security issues. Support from the Mayor's Community Assistance Unit helped build support among community groups.

The participatory design meetings served as a venue for addressing these complaints as well. School principals often brought in neighbors and other key stakeholders so their concerns would be heard and reflected in the design. For example, basketball hoops were sometimes shifted to a non-residential side of the schoolyard or fence heights were raised given previous experience with people breaking in. Every completed design was presented at a public meeting to gain further buy-in. These meetings addressed concerns but also helped ensure the spaces accommodated multiple types of recreation and uses. For example, several teachers wanted to incorporate outdoor and science-based learning into the design. Older neighbors might advocate for fitness circuits. The Trust for Public Land staff related experience renovating schoolyards in the city prior to PlaNYC. They provided several examples of how negative behaviors in a barren and unprogrammed space disappeared after an extensive renovation.

Flexibility in Construction

Many schoolyards serve as spaces for morning line-up or after-school dismissal. The School Construction Authority (SCA) uses the yards to store materials and to erect scaffolding for capital improvements to the school building. Constructing a playground around these other uses required constant communication between construction managers and the school principal as well as between the building and playground contractor. In some instances, the contractors shared the space through careful set-up of safety fencing. Construction schedules also responded to school testing periods. Noisy or smelly work such as asphaltting was performed after school hours or on the weekends.

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Playground construction managers coordinate work around school dismissal and other capital projects impacting the school building.

TRANSFERABILITY

Making the most of Existing Land

New York City, like many dense, world cities, has a scarcity of undeveloped land to turn into new parks. The need for new parkland must be balanced with the need for additional housing, schools, and transit access, and the available land for these critical priorities is scarce as well. As a result, the purchase of more land for conversion into parks does not fully solve the challenge of providing equitable access to parks in a growing city. The program made the most of an existing and underutilized asset – schoolyards. There are hundreds, if not thousands of these spaces around the city that are closed every weekend, all summer, and every evening. In some cases, just unlocking the gates opens an equipped playground. Other sites require renovations to make them suitable for community use.

Public-Private Partnerships

The cooperation of the three program partners and a strong commitment from City Hall has ensured the successful and rapid implementation of the program. DOE provided the land and on site maintenance, DPR brought years of expertise in landscape design and construction, and TPL, the non-profit partner, brought experience in renovating schoolyards in New York and other cities using a participatory design process. The three partners meet regularly to stay aligned and shared practices and resources.

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