Space to Grow: Greening Chicago Schoolyards, a partnership led by Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign, is an innovative program to build green schoolyards that create opportunities for Chicago public school students, their families and neighbors to be physically active, learn about the environment, enjoy green space and grow healthy food, while at the same time improving stormwater management by increasing green infrastructure.

Space to Grow is an innovative public-private partnership that builds green schoolyards at neighborhood public schools in low-income communities of color in Chicago. The program model leverages public investment of capital resources and expertise from Chicago’s two water agencies, the public school district, the Chicago Mayor’s office and nonprofit organizations.

Space to Grow schoolyard transformations prioritize physical activity, outdoor learning and community engagement, with a special focus on low-income communities with the greatest need for parks, green space and urban flood management. The green schoolyards incorporate landscape features—green stormwater infrastructure—that capture a significant amount of rainfall, helping keep the city’s water resources clean and resulting in less neighborhood flooding.
No one knows their school and community better than the children, families, neighbors and school staff members who attend the school and who work and live nearby.

Each Space to Grow school community takes part in a planning process during which these stakeholders provide a vision for the schoolyard. This important step creates a positive and long-lasting foundation for trust and collaboration, helps instill early and deep buy-in from the school community and initiates long-term ownership in maintaining the schoolyard.

A recent evaluation of the Space to Grow planning and design process demonstrated that participants felt their ideas were represented in the schoolyard redesign and reported being happy with the overall results of the transformation—a very valuable outcome of the process as it validates that the process lays the foundation for long-term success of the schoolyards.

BUILDING DEEP RELATIONSHIPS + BUY-IN

Healthy Schools Campaign and Openlands deliver an inclusive planning process that starts with forming a Space to Grow committee that is truly representative of the school community. Schools must formally commit to keep the schoolyard open to the community after school and on weekends or other times when school is not in session, so this committee is vital to helping establish a welcoming space.

The Space to Grow partners work with the committee to plan a series of input sessions and are intentional about how, when and where they hold meetings to facilitate open and engaged participation. The meetings are typically open house style over the course of several hours so participants can attend as their schedules allow. The Space to Grow partners also engage the committee to develop a broad, multifaceted outreach plan to ensure that the entire community is invited to participate in schoolyard planning. In multilingual communities, the outreach and meeting materials are translated, and meetings interpreted for the needs of each community. Space to Grow partners also engage with community organizations, social service agencies, local businesses and places of worship to help spread the word and ensure strong community engagement.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Translate meeting materials and provide interpretation at community events to ensure everyone feels welcome and can participate.
- Communicate consistently. The planning team must include members who have strong community networks—leverage those relationships to keep the school community informed along the way. Always share the information—good or bad.
THE COMMUNITY VISIONING PROCESS

The planning process begins with orientation meetings with the school’s Space to Grow committee and with the project designers, engineers and architects. The goal of each of these meetings is to set expectations about the process, the design goals, the timeline and all parties’ roles and responsibilities.

Typically, the community planning process includes two to three open house meetings as well as a visual preference survey. The meeting style acknowledges that everyone’s comfort level with participation varies, and allows for multiple opportunities to provide input—visual, written and verbal. The partners are intentional about actively removing obstacles to inclusive participation, and also consider power dynamics within the school and community to ensure the best feedback. Providing multiple opportunities—such as participatory mapping, visual preference surveys, one-on-one conversations—and allowing for group, individual or written input also ensures that people with a great deal of institutional power (e.g., the principal or elected officials) are able to provide their input and ideas in a way that does not drown out other voices or create a dynamic where students, parents and community members are less likely to express themselves.

The first planning meeting includes several interactive stations that help gauge the priorities, concerns and desires of the school community. These exercises yield incredible context, feedback and input that are then incorporated into conceptual designs. The interactive nature of the activities also helps establish and build relationships with the school community.

The second meeting allows for the school community to provide feedback on draft concept plans. Interactive stations and exercises allow for detailed questions, individual conversations and feedback on specific elements of the proposed designs. From here, the group can move toward consensus. A third public meeting may be held, depending on how much revision is needed to the initial concept. Once the concept is finalized, construction documentation begins and the projects are sent out for competitive bids.

ON GOING ENGAGEMENT

The Space to Grow partners facilitate community and students planting days so the community can get involved in putting the final touches on the schoolyard, and together plan an official ribbon cutting ceremony. This ceremony is the first of many events held at a schoolyard and is an important milestone and opportunity to engage all stakeholders—from students, teachers and elected officials to community members and business leaders—and ensure the space is welcoming.

Healthy Schools Campaign and Openlands support the school in fully integrating their schoolyard into the school culture and learning experience. This includes community events and educational workshops, as well as professional development for teachers and school staff to ensure they have the tools and resources to leverage the schoolyard as an extension of the classroom.

Through community organizing and engagement, the Space to Grow partners are connecting the school and neighbors with broader community initiatives. The schoolyard becomes an important community gathering space and the perfect place for the neighborhood walking club to meet, for summer community basketball tournaments, for community garden plots and more.

- Provide sample communications and make it easy for the school to communicate about the program.
- Be aware of power dynamics and ensure all voices are heard.
- Create a welcoming and inclusive environment at all meetings and events.
- Take the time to develop a comprehensive outreach and engagement plan that increases the likelihood of participation from a broad representation of stakeholders.
WHY GREEN SCHOOLYARDS

The Children & Nature Network defines green schoolyards as multi-functional school grounds, designed by and for the entire school community, that include places for students, teachers, caregivers and community members to play, learn, explore and grow. A shared space in nature where people can sit, relax, play, exercise or gather with friends and family has immense benefits to the fabric of a community. It fosters social interaction, provides a sense of connection and helps boost health and well-being.

In large cities, like Chicago, children from low-income families and communities of color often attend schools with less access to physical activity and healthy food, inadequate access to nature, higher exposure to environmental toxins in air and water and fewer health services. Cities also face difficult challenges related to climate and water management—for example, Chicago has a profound flooding problem that results from hundreds of acres of impermeable surfaces and a combined sewer system that frequently overwhelms the region’s water treatment facilities. This is being exacerbated by the heavier storms the region is now experiencing as a result of climate change. Nature-based solutions not only address flooding issues, they mitigate health impacts and provide assets for entire communities to enjoy.

Growing evidence points to the diverse benefits of green schoolyards for individuals, but also schools and communities. School districts are some of the biggest landowners in our nation’s cities, with more than 130,000 schools in this country, and cities have the highest concentration of schools. That means most city neighborhoods are connected to a schoolyard. These spaces represent an incredible opportunity to provide safe green space for everyone, and especially for low-income children of color.

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

At the heart of Space to Grow is a unique partnership that generates positive results for a diverse set of partners with different, yet complementary goals—and brings multiple co-benefits to communities. Healthy Schools Campaign and Openlands co-manage the program, and the model brings together capital funds, expertise and leadership from three public agencies: Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Department of Water Management and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago. Space to Grow maximizes financial investment from these two water agencies by designing schoolyards with green infrastructure features that absorb large amounts of water and help address urban flooding issues. Space to Grow also receives support from the Chicago Mayor’s office and is a strategy in the city’s resilience plan to address urban flooding.

HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) is dedicated to making schools healthier places for all students. HSC believes that health and wellness should be incorporated into every aspect of the school experience. Founded in 2002, HSC advocates for children to have better access to nutritious school food, physical activity, school health services and clean air to shape their lifelong learning and health. HSC facilitates collaboration between students, parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers to help this diverse group of stakeholders lead change for healthier schools at the school, district, state and national levels. Visit healthyschoolscampaign.org.

Founded in 1963, Openlands protects the natural and open spaces of northeastern Illinois and the surrounding region to ensure cleaner air and water, protect natural habitats and wildlife and help balance and enrich our lives. Openlands’ vision for the region is a landscape that includes a vast network of land and water trails, tree-lined streets and intimate public gardens within easy reach of every city dweller. It also includes parks and preserves big enough to provide natural habitat and to give visitors a sense of the vast prairies, woodlands and wetlands that were here before the cities. Visit openlands.org.

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