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.
Space to Grow schoolyards are built in communities that have significant urban flooding issues and are less likely to have parks, playgrounds or green space for outdoor play or connecting with nature, and many students come to school suffering the impact of food insecurity and childhood trauma.

The schoolyards provide healthy, engaging places for students to be physically active before, during and after school and serve as an outdoor extension of the classroom for lessons ranging from science experiments, to poetry and writing, to nutrition education. Further, they are helping to mitigate local flooding and the adverse effects of flooding.

Space to Grow is a dynamic partnership that is benefiting Chicago students and has important lessons and learnings for cities across the United States and around the world. Chicago has entered into formal agreements to share its green schoolyards model with Paris and Rotterdam and the partners share this model with a variety of audiences across the United States.

CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIP

The Space to Grow model brings together capital funds, expertise and leadership from Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Department of Water Management and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago and has support from the Chicago Mayor’s office. Space to Grow maximizes financial investment from the two water agencies by designing schoolyards with green infrastructure features that absorb large amounts of water, keeping it out of the sewer system during the heaviest of storms. The capital partners have intergovernmental agreements that govern how they work together, and each agency contributes one-third of the cost for constructing each schoolyard.

The partnership is co-managed by two nonprofit organizations: Healthy Schools Campaign works to make schools healthier places for children to learn and

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: BUILDING SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

- Create a shared vision and values for your work with partners and be explicit about your priorities and stakeholders before launching your project. The multiple benefits are good for everyone!
- Document a clear process for program management, communications and decision making. This builds trust, consistency and resilient, long-lasting partnerships.
- Celebrate every success and always bring it back to the shared vision and goals.
thrive, and Openlands focuses on connecting people to nature in their daily lives right where they live.

Healthy Schools Campaign and Openlands serve as managing partners to make sure all of the partners are in sync and working efficiently toward the program’s goals and vision. The partners also support the schools in fully integrating their schoolyards into the school culture and learning experience. This includes working with parent and community leaders and organizing community events and workshops, as well as professional development for teachers and school staff to ensure they can leverage the schoolyard as an extension of the classroom. The nonprofit managing partners are supported by philanthropic and corporate partners, making this a truly unique public-private partnership.

Space to Grow partners have developed a dynamic vision for a partnership and green schoolyards program.

---

**HEALTH + WELLNESS, OUTDOOR LEARNING AND CONNECTING WITH NATURE**

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) has a strong track record of making schools healthier places for all students, from advocating at the local and national levels for healthier school food and comprehensive school health services to reinstating recess and helping Chicago revamp its physical education program. Through that work, HSC realized many Chicago schoolyards were in disrepair and couldn’t support all the positive changes the district was making.

Openlands is dedicated to protecting the Chicago region’s natural and open spaces and connecting people of all ages with nature where they live. Openlands has a long history of advocating for healthy waterways and working with Chicago schools to connect students and communities with nature in their daily lives, and has made a significant commitment to building school gardens. Both organizations see Space to Grow as a powerful extension of their mission driven work.

---

**UNIQUE FUNDING STRUCTURE**

Space to Grow’s capital partners teamed up because they saw the multiple and connected benefits that would result from making a major infrastructure investment in public schools serving students from low-income families in Chicago’s communities of color. The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago has a mandate from the U.S. EPA to install green infrastructure within its geographic area, which aligned with the agency’s desire to be more present in communities. As part of Chicago’s commitment to sustainability—outlined in the Resilient Chicago and Sustainable Chicago 2015 plans—the Chicago Department of Water Management is also committed to support the installation of green stormwater infrastructure to help offset basement flooding.

Partnering with Chicago Public Schools provided a unique opportunity because the district is one of the largest owners of impermeable surface on public property in the city. The district also has a significant need for updating play equipment but very limited resources to fund them. Making these links was instrumental in creating a mutually beneficial opportunity for all of the partners, and also has significant co-benefits for communities and schools.

---

- Don’t just measure and evaluate. Be sure to communicate the results with funders, partners and stakeholders.
- Develop a shared communications plan and program identity that ensures every partner communicates consistently and feels acknowledged.
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 overwheels the region’s water treatment facilities. This is being exacerbated by the heavier storms the region is 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.

PROGRAM EVALUATION
To ensure Space to Grow is a successful model and providing effective support, the program is being rigorously evaluated to measure the effectiveness of the green infrastructure elements and the impact of the schoolyard transformations on students, schools and communities.

A recent evaluation of Space to Grow schoolyard transformations showed students were engaged in more physical activity and in a greater percentage of positive social interactions following the Space to Grow transformation. School staff, parents and community members also noted more positive relationships between the school and neighborhood, and felt the renovated schoolyards were safer. Data also shows that the green infrastructure elements installed at the schools are performing well.

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.

© 2019 Healthy Schools Campaign and Openlands